Unofficial compilation of *The Nature of Predators* Reddit posts.

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Chapter 1

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: July 12, 2136

There were two known instances of a predatory species achieving sentience in the galaxy.

The Arxur were the first to be discovered, and, as an anomaly, sparked the Federation's curiosity. By previous hypotheses on intelligence, their existence was impossible. Conventional wisdom stated that cooperation led to higher thinking, which in turn, led to the formation of technological societies. A predator's natural instinct for aggression should have limited their evolution.

But it turned out that there was another motivator for technological progress; war. The Arxur derived pleasure from killing each other, and in doing so, managed to claw their way to an industrial stage. Their warfare was so deadly that we feared they would become extinct before we could study them.

The Federation saw their cruelty, but in our naivety, we thought we could change them. If we uplifted them, there would be no logical reason for their destructive ways to persist. Thus, we made our worst mistake: we decided to intervene.

It was out of our kindness that we unleashed the galaxy's worst monsters. We gave genocidal maniacs the means to escape their planet, and all but invited them to our doorstep. The Federation was an easy target to them, and they set out to claim our territories for themselves. They torched worlds, enslaved millions, and bred our children as delicacies. Our pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears; predators had no sense of compassion to appeal to, after all.

The Federation rallied together to fend them off, and began the ceaseless war for our survival. From that point onward, it was agreed that no predatory species could be allowed to reach the stars. Their kind were too great of a threat to the civilized universe.

Little known to the public, scientists discovered a second predatory sapient centuries ago. Much like the Arxur, they slaughtered and committed atrocities against their own; it was visible from their broadcasts. The Federation voted to exterminate them, before it was

too late.

But while we spent decades drafting termination plans, hundreds of nuclear explosions were detected across the planet. Our strategists concluded, with a grim sense of relief, that they had wiped themselves out. The species was forgotten, mentioned only as an asterisk to the Arxur's unique predator status.

Yet now, my advisors were digging every record of these predators off of the internet. There was a vessel inbound for our world, with a subspace trail pointing back to the planet Earth.

"Governor Tarva." My military advisor, Kam, was growing more impatient by the minute. It was obvious that he wanted to be cleared for action. "Please, I beg you. We must try to shoot them down."

"Are you certain we cannot evacuate the planet?" I asked.

Kam sighed. "You know the answer, ma'am. They were within orbital range by the time we detected them. It's already too late."

I grimaced. Every FTL relay was broadcasting a planetary distress signal, from the moment we identified the human ship. It was in vain, of course; it would take hours for our Federation allies to reach us. By the time they arrived, our world would be reduced to rubble. At least someone would investigate our death, and hopefully, put the pieces together.

Was there any way to stop the coming onslaught? Was enslavement preferable to death? It was doubtful, but I didn't see another way to bargain for my race's survival. There was nothing else to be done.

To put it simply, we couldn't divert resources to another army of predators. Our people didn't have the manpower or the spirit. Local forces were depleted from a recent Arxur incursion, which was thwarted by the slimmest of margins. The humans caught us at a time of maximum vulnerability; there was no chance to fight or flee.

As difficult as it was to surrender our home, it was the only option.

"Yes… I know. Send out an emergency alert. Get the civilians to bomb shelters immediately." I stared at my paws, cursing the day I chose to run for office. "Contact the incoming ship. I—I will personally offer our unconditional surrender."

“Surrender? Without firing a single shot?!” the advisor growled.

“Perhaps they’ll be kinder than the Arxur. My hope is they’ll spare the children.” The video tapes of our children, lined up in front of the gray reptilians and shot by a mass grave, rolled in my mind. It was their way of taunting us. “At worst, we can buy some time. But if we fight, they’ll kill us all.”

I swiveled my chair away from the advisor, signaling that the discussion was over. An aide propped a camera in front of me, and with a swish of my tail, I showed that I was ready. Fear swelled in my throat as we hailed the vessel on all frequencies. Would these creatures even answer? Predators didn’t talk to prey, except to toy with them. Perhaps they would pick up, just to laugh at our desperation and weakness.

To my surprise, the inbound ship accepted our transmission. A brown-skinned being appeared on screen, sitting in some sort of pilot’s chair. The words of our surrender were almost to my lips when its forward-facing eyes locked with mine. To my horror, it bared its teeth in a vicious snarl. Its sharp, hungry stare halted my thought process, sending my instincts into a primal cascade.

This thing was feral! The hostility was unmistakable in its expression. It uttered a few words in a guttural dialect, which I assumed was an announcement of our impending doom.

The translator tingled by my ear, pressing the meaning into my mind. I took a shaky breath, certain the machine was wrong.

Hello. We come in peace, on behalf of the human race.

I stared at it, lost for words. “Peace? What?”

The translator spit out my question in the guttural language.

The predator closed its maw, tilting its head. “Did that translate wrong? You know, peace? Friendship?”

“Yes…I know what peace means,” I stammered. “Why would you want that?”

“Why would you not?” It seemed almost taken aback. “My people have looked to the stars for a long time and wondered if there was anyone else out there. I’m happy to have an answer, and to know we’re not alone.”

“You speak of peace, but you can’t keep the snarl off your face,

predator!" Kam interjected.

"What? I don't…" it trailed off, as though something occurred to it. "You mean the 'smile', don't you? I am so sorry. I didn't mean to offend you, really."

"Smile? What does that word mean?" I asked hesitantly.

"Er, it's how humans show happiness and good will. Our lips curve up and…" It rubbed its forehead with a soft appendage. "Can we start over? I'm Noah. We're here on a mission of peaceful exploration."

Noah really expected us to believe that flashing teeth was meant as a friendly gesture?! No, this had to be some sort of twisted game. Predators didn't do "peaceful exploration." They trampled everything in their path and then burned it for good measure.

At least it wasn't killing us immediately. What choice did I have but to play along?

So I gazed into those animal eyes, and tried to keep my voice steady. "I'm Governor Tarva. Welcome to Venlil Prime."

"Thanks," the human said. "I must admit, we were quite surprised to receive your transmission."

"Y-you were? Why did you come here, if you didn't detect us?"

"We're from a planet called Earth, rich in water and oxygen. One of science's nagging questions has been the origin of life. Our mission was to examine worlds similar to our own, and yours was the perfect candidate."

"You suspected we had the conditions for life, then."

"Well, yes, but every reasonable scientist back home thought our 'first contact' would be a primitive lifeform. Finding a single-celled organism in your oceans would've been a major victory."

"Why would you care?"

"Um, we were starting to think we were the only instance of life arising. But now, finding a full-fledged, technological civilization; it's wondrous. One that not only spotted us, but seems to understand what we are too."

"You keep using the first person, plural. Who is we?"

"Of course, where are my manners?" Noah pivoted the camera to

the side, revealing another human sitting at a console. “This is Sara, my co-pilot. She’s logging all of this for our records.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “I’m not much of a talker. But Noah runs his mouth enough for both of us, anyways.”

The captain’s eyebrows shot up. “I do not!”

For a brief moment, watching their playful banter, I saw a kindred intelligence in them. My logical brain kicked in a second later, and the illusion dissolved with a cold certainty. *Those predators aren’t searching for life for ‘science’,* I chided myself. *They’re looking for prey. It’s an interstellar hunting expedition.*

This was the humans’ first realization that other intelligent life existed. All these measured words were a way of testing the waters, searching for any signs of weakness. We couldn’t clue them in to the fact that they were different. Perhaps if we kept it together, with minimal indications of empathy or fear, they would leave of their own accord.

Despite my misgivings, our best bet might be to treat this like an ordinary first contact situation.

“What would you say to seeing Venlil Prime firsthand? As esteemed guests of the Republic, of course.”

Noah’s eyes sparkled. “It would be an honor.”

Chapter 2

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: July 12, 2136

A shiver crept down my spine, and it wasn't only because of the frosty air. The thought of standing in close proximity to a predator made my skin crawl, but it was too late to turn back now. All I could do was watch, with mute horror, as the human ship powered down, and a landing ramp unfurled. The primates marched onto Venlil soil, and I suppressed a whimper. This felt like a nightmare I would wake up from at any moment.

Noah and Sara marveled at their surroundings with wide-eyed fascination. Their gaze lingered on the intricate mansion behind them, then shifted to the city silhouette in the distance. The way they physically rotated their head to look around was uncanny. The menacing eyes of a predator didn't quite offer the peripheral vision we enjoyed, that much was clear.

There was no way they were appreciating the beauty of our architecture. An ominous thought crept into my mind; were they only landing to scout an invasion?

Noah's eyes landed on our diplomatic envoy, and he stalked toward us without further hesitation. There were a mere three individuals present: me, Kam, and my diplomatic advisor, Cheln. I knew it was a pitiful showing, but it had been next to impossible to persuade anyone to tag along.

"Listen," I hissed. "We need to act normally. No fear, and no emotion."

Kam flicked his ears in disgust. "I can't believe you invited them here."

"We are buying time for the Federation to arrive."

"But how can you even look at them? You want to speak to those… creatures, for hours?"

"Of course not. But the other option is another war with predators, and we see how well that's worked out with the Arxur. If there is a slight chance to avoid bloodshed, I will take it. Happily."

“We should’ve blasted that ship out of the sky, while we had the chance. If you expect me to welcome these humans with open arms, that’s not going to happen.”

“You are *not* to antagonize them. Are we clear?” I growled.

Kam huffed, and I feared that was an answer of itself. There was no time to persuade him though, as the two humans had closed within earshot. I prayed that the advisor would come to his senses, and keep his thoughts to himself. We needed to put our best foot forward, if we wanted to get rid of the beasts peacefully.

Keeping up the appearance of strength was important, if only to discourage the humans from decimating our home. Trying to rile them up was a different story; that was nigh suicidal. Predators thrived on the assertion of dominance, so I doubted they’d turn down a blatant challenge.

“Governor Tarva.” Noah stopped a few paces away from our group, and flashed his teeth. “It’s lovely to meet you in person.”

My heart pounded, fear coursing through my veins like a dreadful cocktail. There was not a worse visual cue in the galaxy than flaunting one’s fangs. The threat it communicated felt much more tangible in person. I swayed on my feet, trying to fight off the light-headedness.

A thud sounded beside me, which I realized was Cheln hitting the pavement. My diplomatic advisor fainting was not a good look, I knew that. Even Kam had his ears pressed against his head, earlier bluster forgotten.

Wonderful, I thought. *So much for behaving normally.*

Noah’s eyes stretched wide, and his mistake seemed to dawn on him. He quickly covered his mouth with a hand.

“Um, sorry,” the predator captain muttered. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Are they ok?”

There was no way to salvage the optics of this one; the humans definitely realized we were afraid of them at this point. I don’t think my plan could have collapsed in a more disastrous manner. The initial idea of surrendering crept back into my mind. Whatever their ulterior motives were, there was nothing to deter them from taking what they pleased.

The strange thing was, Noah seemed more distraught than amused. This species was slower to pounce on weakness than the Arxur. Perhaps there was still a chance to salvage the meeting, or explain away the behavior?

I flicked my ears, trying to calm myself. “Yes, he’ll be fine. This is just—a bit overwhelming.”

“Aliens landing on your planet. That must come as a terrible shock.” Sara exhaled heavily, before scribbling something on her notepad. “You’re handling this quite well, all things considered.”

“I can’t imagine what this would be like without your translator,” Noah said. “Please, forgive us. We’re new to this whole first contact business.”

Kam knelt by Cheln’s side, trying to rouse him. Given that the nurturing trait stemmed from compassion, that wasn’t the sort of behavior to exhibit in front of predators either. I had to nip this conduct in the bud, or else the primates would think it was commonplace. That answered what I should do, but how could I leave a man to die in the cold? How could I chastise my military advisor for basic empathy? That level of cruelty was beyond my sensibilities.

Noah stooped beside the fallen diplomat, and I braced myself for the worst. Predators placed no value on sentient life, not even their own; the Arxur taught us that much. It was obvious the human thought we should abandon Cheln, rather than allow weakness to tarnish the gene pool.

“How can I help?” were the only words that came out of his mouth.

I gaped at the human in disbelief, certain I had misheard. Where were the derisive comments, making light of Cheln’s condition?

“You’ve helped enough,” Kam spat.

Noah lowered his head. “I’m sorry. It was an accident.”

“It’s alright,” I jumped in, before a quarrel could break out. “I apologize for my advisor’s behavior. He’s a bit…on edge.”

“I understand,” the male human said, with a despondent sigh. “I fear I’ve ruined this whole thing.”

“Noah meant no harm.” Sara patted her companion on the back reassuringly. “Seeing an alien culture firsthand…it’s the opportunity

of a lifetime. You have no idea how excited we are. Clearly, that wasn't expressed in the best way."

The humans' behavior was growing more baffling by the minute. Everything in the Federation's database suggested this was a base, violent species. I thought they wouldn't be able to turn their weapons against us fast enough. While their visual cues aligned with that assumption, their temperament seemed otherwise mellow.

Why maintain this ruse? If they were probing for weakness, as I hypothesized, they had already seen enough to arrive at a conclusion on that front. I was beginning to think I didn't understand their intentions at all.

Perhaps these predators were capable of higher brain functions than we gave them credit for.

"Can you help us carry Cheln inside?" I took a deep breath, waiting for my translator to catch up. "We'll give you a tour after that."

The humans nodded, and positioned themselves to shoulder the brunt of the weight. A faint hope stirred in my chest. They were in no rush to finish us off! That meant we had time to wait for the cavalry after all.

I knew the Federation's response would be harsh, when they found predators traipsing about the Venlil homeworld. Their actions would be along the lines of Kam's suggestions: shoot first, ask questions later. The only reason this particular species hadn't been wiped out, was we believed them to be extinct already. But the plans to obliterate Earth were drafted centuries ago. Eradicating humanity, in one fell swoop, might still be possible.

We only needed to stall the landing party a little longer. What would happen to Noah and Sara next…well, an attempt would be made to capture them for scientific study. If the task proved too difficult, a special ops team would be sent to dispatch them.

A strange guilt tore through my stomach, at the thought of the humans tied up in a lab. It was a misguided sense of empathy, but…

They are predators! They survive by killing species lower on the totem pole. They literally eat flesh, I scolded myself. *These humans slaughter each other, all the time, anyways.*

"Thanks for your hospitality, Governor." Sara cleared her throat,

locking eyes with me. “I can tell our species will be great friends, one day.”

The mere sight of these creatures disgusted me, but what if we were wrong about them? Wasn’t my intention to avoid bloodshed?

“Yes…friends.” I flicked my ears in agreement, and tried to bury my conscience. “I hope we will be.”

Chapter 3

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: July 12, 2136

The tour of the governor's mansion started off without incident, and my nerves began to settle down. The humans tailed behind Kam and I, with questions pertaining to every subject under the sun. Culture, history, politics: they couldn't absorb information fast enough. Had any other species arrived at our doorstep, with such childlike curiosity, their enthusiasm would be lauded.

Hell, if you didn't look at the humans, you could *almost* forget they were predators.

My brain switched into autopilot mode, as I steered our group to the next stop: my office. However, the second I opened the door, I realized I had made a dreadful mistake. In this morning's panic, I had left a TV on. The news was cycling through footage of bomb shelters across the planet. Government advisories played on loop in the background. They were speaking rather candidly about the humans' foray, and the likelihood of mass casualties.

I scrambled to turn it off, but it was too late. The humans wandered over to the screen, staring in silence. They hadn't been this quiet since we started the tour. Seeing masses of people, huddled together, crying, must have stirred something in them.

"I was wondering why there were so few staff here. No reporters either," Noah said finally. "They've all been evacuated, haven't they?"

I cast my gaze downward. "Yes."

"You thought we were here to attack you." There was a flash of something in his brown eyes, and he pressed a hand to his forehead. "My God…Sara, you see how they look at us. I think they still believe that."

"Is that true, Tarva?" Sara asked. "What do you think is our purpose?"

Panic fluttered in my chest. There was no way to formulate a convincing reply. I took a few steps back, eyeing the humans

warily. To deny the accusation would be to discount their intelligence; they would see right through any further deception. Silence was a way of confirming their suspicions, without having to vocalize our terror.

Kam, however, was eager to supply the answer. “To kill us. And to have a grand old time dragging it out.”

“No, no, no! That is not the case *at all*,” Noah hissed. “We mean you no harm. Look, if you want us to leave, we will.”

Sara raised her hands slowly. “We never wanted to cause fear, or disrupt your lives. We just wanted to meet other people…other people like us…”

“There are no people *like you*,” Kam growled.

“Really?” She pointed to a 3D photo on my desk, a hard glint in her eyes. “What about them?”

The picture in question was of myself, at a conference with dozens of Federation leaders. It was obvious, to any intelligent observer, that those diverse lifeforms were not of Venlil origin. What were the humans supposed to think? Seeing us comfortable with other aliens, they had to be wondering why they were so feared. I cursed myself for such a blatant oversight.

“You’re right.” I managed to speak, though my voice was hardly more than a whisper. “They’re not from this world. Like you.”

Noah cleared his throat. “How many intelligent species are there… that you know of? How did you find each other?”

I hesitated. If the humans intended to purge the galaxy, news of the Federation’s existence would give them a starting point. It might also tip them off to the coming rescue party, and cause them to accelerate invasion plans. But by the same token, they would discover it anyways. At least this way, we could gauge their reaction.

“Hundreds. Most of us are members of the Galactic Federation. It’s a central governing body of sorts.”

“Why do we bother you then? You’re used to aliens.” Sara’s eyes narrowed to unnerving slits. “Do we resemble something from your past?”

A growl rumbled in Kam’s throat. “You’re a predator. A sentient

predator."

Wonderful. Could this conversation have gone any worse? In his hatred, the military advisor had just told the humans *the actual reason* they were different. It stood to reason that if they were predators…by default, we were the opposite. If their instincts weren't awakened before, they had to be salivating now.

There was a long silence, and I could almost see the gears turning in Sara's mind. Surprise flashed on her face, as though she didn't understand why their nature mattered. Was this the first time the notion crossed her mind? It was tough to believe the humans were that oblivious to the food-chain dynamics.

"Is that uncommon?" she asked.

"Very."

"How many are there?"

"You're the second."

Noah turned his piercing gaze toward Kam. "Who is the first?"

Silence blanketed the room with a heavy grip. Nobody wanted to explain what happened with the Arxur; not even Kam would offer pointed comments on that subject. We didn't need to give the humans any ideas. The captain seemed to notice our expressions darken, and the lines on his own face hardened.

"Who is the first?" he repeated.

What words could provide an adequate description of evil incarnate? My eyes swelled with water as memories resurfaced. My father, captured alive on the warfront, shipped back piece by piece. The day the Arxur launched a gas attack against my daughter's school and left her braindead. The slave pens, the irradiated worlds, the Venlil kept as cattle…

I buried my head in my paws, trying to hide the tears. Showing such weakness in front of the humans was the worst thing I could do. This species, for all its refined words, was cut from the same cloth as our oppressors. If they saw the extent of our pain, it would be weaponized down the road.

Noah's eyes widened, and my heart sank in my chest. The observant visitor had noticed my emotional lapse, and seemed to be debating his next action. After a moment's thought, he shuffled closer to me.

Every instinct screamed at me to back away, but my paws refused to budge.

As the predator reached out with a meaty paw, I waited for him to strike me. My mind was braced for taunting, torture, or whatever else may come.

Instead, he gently placed an appendage on my shoulder. “Whatever they did, we’re not like that. We’re not going to hurt you, okay?”

Something seemed to snap in my soul, like a series of cracks spreading through a dam. Raw emotion poured through my psyche, and I broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Noah pulled me closer to him, stroking my head in a soothing manner. His embrace was warm, soft, and delicate, yet I could feel the strength in his arms. There was a silent promise of safety in his grasp. He released me after a few seconds, and wiped a tear off of my face.

Kam’s jaw looked like it was about to fall off. It was rare to see the general left speechless, but I understood why. Kindness was antithetical to the nature of a predator; he couldn’t believe his eyes.

For the first time since the humans appeared, I considered that they might be benevolent. They had to feel empathy to understand how to comfort someone, after all. A decision cemented itself in my mind. I couldn’t allow innocent people to die, simply because of their appearance. The predators might be a threat, but we had judged them based on preconceived notions.

“I believe you, Noah,” I sniffled. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s the first time you’ve said my name!” The human turned his head away, hiding a ‘smile.’ “Either of our names.”

I chuckled. “B-better late than never. Kam, rescind the planetary distress signal.”

“I can’t do that, ma’am,” the advisor said.

“I wasn’t asking your opinion. That was an order!” I snapped. “For stars’ sake, I’ll do it myself.”

“You don’t understand. The Federation is already here. They’re hailing us now.”

A string of curses escaped my lips, and the humans tilted their heads in confusion. I tried to imagine how the poor saps felt. A few hours ago, they hadn’t even known extraterrestrial life existed.

Now, they learned of a galactic community; one that hated them without provocation. They were taking the news in stride, but it had to be overwhelming.

Unfortunately, I still had one more bombshell to drop on them. How terrifying would it be, as guests on another world, to have warships arrive hellbent on killing you?

“Wait, why is that bad?” Noah asked. “I thought the Federation are your friends.”

I avoided his gaze. “They came because we set off a distress signal. They’re expecting a fight.”

“I see. Well, why don’t we talk to them, and explain that it was a misunderstanding? Once they know that we’re peaceful–”

“No. I appreciate the thought, but the second they see your…” I waved a paw in the general vicinity of my mouth and eyes. “They won’t listen to a word you say. They’ll want you dead.”

Or worse, I added to myself.

“Right…” the human muttered. “So…”

“I’m sorry about all this, really.” I scratched my chin, trying to think. “I’ll try to drive them off. Just stay out of sight, and let me do the talking. Okay?”

Noah nodded. “Got it.”

I took a deep breath. Despite their repulsive appearance, the humans’ actions exuded such a genuine kindness. They were strangely charming, when you sensed the person beneath the monster. If anything happened to Noah and Sara, the responsibility fell on my shoulders. To think minutes ago, I had been hoping for the Federation to swoop in and save us.

Now, my only objective was to save the lives of two predators.

Chapter 4

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: July 12, 2136

If the sensor data was to be believed, the Federation warships were gunning to Venlil Prime at a blistering speed. Their hails seemed urgent, frantic even; they were resending the communication request every few seconds. I had never seen such a harried response, but it made sense.

Venlil Prime enjoyed a strategic location, nestled in the galaxy's outer arm. It was a fair distance away from Arxur space, so it was difficult for them to execute a surprise assault. Not to mention that it was a key supply route for our troops and a launch-point for rim patrols. Losing such an outpost would be a major setback for the Federation.

As we accepted the hail, I was surprised to recognize the face on screen. It was Captain Sovlin, from the powerful Gojidi Union. He had risen to galactic fame after leading a valiant charge to break an Arxur siege on his home world. Typically, the Federation would just send the nearest available assets, but this time, they'd scrounged up someone competent.

"Governor Tarva." The relief was plain on Sovlin's face, as he realized that we were alive. "We're here to assist. What is the reason for your distress?"

The humans were waiting in the wings, just out of view of the camera. Sara jotted something down on her notepad; she seemed to be sketching the new alien before her. A pang of guilt stabbed at my chest, as I realized my instincts were still abuzz. Seeing them out of the corner of my eyes was making my skin crawl. The way they craned their heads to look at the screen…it was sickening.

"I see the Federation sent their finest," I said. "The Venlil Republic expresses our sincere gratitude for your response. Unfortunately, you've come all this way for no reason."

"By galactic law, that signal is only to be used for an extinction level event. You owe us an explanation. A good one," the Gojid growled. "Did you deal with…the problem on your own?"

“There was no problem.”

Sovlin blinked several times. “I’m sorry?”

“It was a false alarm. Our sensors malfunctioned due to a software update.”

“What did you think you saw?”

“We thought a pred—um, Arxur ship jumped into orbital range.”

“And you figured out that was false because?”

“There’s nothing up there on visual, Captain. Our backup sensors didn’t detect anything either. Not to mention, we’re still alive.”

The Gojid squinted at me, and I could tell he didn’t quite buy my story. Sensor malfunctions made themselves apparent quickly, due to the lack of corroborating evidence. He knew we should’ve rejected faulty data much faster than the span of a few hours. The sharp glint in his eyes told me he intended to sniff out the truth.

“Kam. You’re awfully quiet,” the Federation officer noted. “Do you have anything to add?”

“I don’t feel like talking.” The military advisor paused. His gaze was not focused on the screen, so I figured he was studying the humans out of his periphery. “Nothing to add anyways. Tarva said it all.”

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. With the extent to which Kam despised the visitors, I half-expected him to out them at the first opportunity. Had this call taken place a few minutes earlier, I suspect he would’ve turned the humans over. But their recent behavior must have impressed their sensitivity upon him too.

Sovlin scrutinized us, suspicion marring his features. “Why didn’t you rescind the distress signal? It’s still broadcasting now.”

“I forgot,” I replied.

“You forgot?!” The captain’s voice leapt up an octave, and he flicked his claws in disgust. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Do you have any idea the systems we’ve exposed by coming here? While we’re chatting, a planet with a real fucking threat could be glassed.”

Well, at least he seemed to buy the story. The Gojid’s anger was justified, in fairness. If the Arxur invaded our neighbors now, Federation forces wouldn’t be available to come to their defense.

“Sorry,” I offered meekly.

“Whatever. We’ll need to scan the subspace readings ourselves,” Sovlin said through gritted teeth. “For our logs.”

I swallowed. If the Federation took the measurements themselves, they’d find ample evidence of human activity. The realization that we were hiding predators would horrify a seasoned veteran like Sovlin. With the amount of exposure he had to the grays, he wouldn’t accept the possibility that predators could be more than animals. In all likelihood, he would assume we were acting under duress, no matter what we said. Ships would be requested to bombard Earth the second the trail was identified.

“That will not be acceptable. It’ll only waste more of your time and energy.” I straightened, and tried to make myself look confident. “There is no need for a formal survey. Is our word not enough for your report?”

“Standard protocol dictates—”

“People are freaked out enough from the false alarm. The last thing they need to see is a Federation armada, frolicking around in the atmosphere.”

“You called us, Tarva. I’m going to do my job, and *then,* I will leave.”

“You’ll leave now. Your ships are not welcome here. If you enter our orbit, you will be fired upon.”

Sovlin’s milky eyes glowed with hatred. “Go ahead then! Fire away. You wouldn’t dare.”

The indicators plotting out the armada’s position crept toward our homeworld, and I sighed in dismay. The last thing I wanted was to be trading missiles with our Federation allies, but we might not have a choice. It seemed that Sovlin would barge into our territory all the same, since he had the firepower to disregard our warning. He figured we’d give into simple, brutish intimidation.

I gave a few tail signals to Kam, indicating for him to detonate missiles just short of their formation. This was an irreversible step, firing upon our long-time allies. The Federation would, at best, abandon us in the fight against the Arxur. Was I damning our species to extinction? I mean, what were the chances that the humans would protect us? Hell, I still wasn’t positive they wouldn’t drop the facade, the second this fleet was gone. We should be

grateful if they didn't murder us all themselves.

Captain Sovlin wrenched his claws in shock, as the computer warned him of inbound missiles. He barked at the crew to reverse course and divert power to shields. Then, he relayed orders to the rest of the fleet to fall back. I thought he'd forgotten the video call was open, until he shot a blistering glare at the camera.

"You SHOT AT US!" The Gojid stared at his weapons console, as though considering whether to return fire. "You *actually shot at us.* That's an act of war."

"That was a warning shot. We don't want to hurt you, but we will," I hissed.

"How can you be so ungrateful? After all that we've done for you," he spat. "I'll be recommending sanctions in my report. And the next time you call for help…we'll let the grays eat you miserable fucks."

The feed cut out abruptly, and I sank to the floor in relief. There would be hell to pay at the next Federation summit, but at least our mistake had been undone without bloodshed. It remained to be seen how the humans would reward our gamble; their body language betrayed little emotion. What if the astronauts were cross with us? We had plotted and nearly gone through with their execution, after all.

"They're gone." I turned to face the predators, and prayed that we made the right decision. "You're safe now."

Noah clasped his hands together. "Thank you, both of you. You didn't have to protect us. I hope the consequences aren't too severe…that guy sounded pissed."

"Ha, it was worth it. Did you see the look on his face?" Kam chuckled.

Noah's lips curved up, and a rumbling sound came from his chest. It sounded like growling, but my translator was insistent that it was laughter. The way predators conveyed emotion left a lot to be desired. My logical brain agreed with the machine, but my instincts weren't as convinced.

Sara jabbed an elbow in her partner's stomach. "What did they say about smiling?!"

"That hurt!" he protested. "I can't help it. Kam made me laugh."

The military advisor flicked his ears. “What can I say? I’m a funny guy.”

“Funny or not, Sovlin wasn’t playing. The Gojids have a lot of pull with the Federation,” I muttered. “We just burned a serious bridge.”

“Can you patch things up down the road?” Sara asked.

“After decades of groveling? Sure.” I sighed, shaking my head. “But enough of that. We need to talk.”

The female predator nodded. “What about?

“First off, do you still want to be here? We’ve been terrible hosts. I understand if you rescind your offer of friendship, after what we put you through.”

“It takes more than that to scare us off, Tarva. I’m happy we could work through our differences together.”

Sara was well-spoken, same as her partner, but I couldn’t shake the lingering doubts. If our species were to make an honest attempt at friendship, disclosure of Arxur history was a must. A secret that abhorrent couldn’t fester between us, especially when it would be the subtext of all our interactions.

When the humans learned what the Arxur had done, they would realize their own species’ untapped potential. The tales would trickle back to Terran leadership and circulate amongst the populace. What if it inspired them to take up the torch? It wasn’t too late to change their mind on harming us. How deep could a predator’s compassion run, anyways?

I drew a shaky breath. “We never answered your question, about the…first predators we encountered. I think we owe you a p-proper explanation.”

“You don’t owe us anything,” Noah said in a soft tone. “If you’re not ready, you don’t have to talk about it.”

My resolve hardened as I met the male human’s eyes. I recalled the horror in Noah’s voice, when Kam suggested they were here to kill us all. The feel of his rough thumb, wiping saline from my cheek. Those weren’t the actions of the Arxur. These were people, with intelligence and emotion.

“I want to. I want you to know everything.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Tarva?” Kam asked.

“Yes, I am. I have to believe that the humans are worth the risk we’re taking.” I could feel my heart rate accelerating, despite my confident words. The mere thought of the grays conjured fear and dread. “The first predators were the Arxur. The Federation has been at war with them for centuries.”

The male human raised an eyebrow. “All of you, against them?”

“And it’s not enough,” I responded. “Noah, they’ve hunted twenty percent of all sentient species to extinction. In this galaxy, anyways.”

His predatory eyes widened. “…why?!”

“They kill for pleasure. They want us to suffer.” I reached for my tablet, and pulled up a recent video the Arxur had sent us. “See for yourself.”

Noah pried the device out of my paws, and Sara leaned in to look at the footage. It depicted a group of Arxur guards, laughing as they released farm-raised Venlil pups from their pen. The reptilians wanted to hunt their meals. To watch their prey squirm in terror. The younglings had their eyes gouged out, and if they didn’t run fast enough to amuse the guards, they were prodded with an electric rod.

As the Arxur clubbed a pup repeatedly on screen, making sure to break all of its limbs first, I watched the humans’ reactions. At first, they seemed shocked, but then…their countenance morphed into something else. Their faces contorted into a mask of pure hatred: eyes dilated, lips curled back, neck veins bulging. There was the predator that had been concealed with such care. I was suddenly more inclined to believe that a “smile” was their friendly expression.

The humans either had a sudden desire to eat us, or were livid at the treatment of our people. I hoped it was the latter.

“This is how they treat prisoners? Children at that?” Sara asked.

Children at that. She seemed to implicitly understand that made it worse.

“Prisoners? No, that’s a farm.” Kam eyed the humans warily, but his tone had lost its edge. “The hardy species become slaves, the ones that taste good become food, and everyone else gets their planets blown to smithereens.”

Noah passed the tablet back to me. I flinched at the iciness in his glare.

“Send us everything you have on the Arxur,” he said. “There’s a human concept I’m sure Earth would love to teach them.”

I stared at the angry predator. “And…what is that concept, exactly?”

A toothy smile crossed Noah’s face. “We call it ‘karma.’”

Chapter 5

Memory transcription subject:*UN Secretary-General Elias Meier*

Date [standardized human time]: July 13, 2136

The 2136 climate change summit was the latest in an ongoing saga, complete with the usual finger pointing and empty promises. The United Nations had taken on a role as a central world government following the Satellite Wars of the late 21st century; Russia, China, and the United States were still rebuilding their crippled power grids in its aftermath. After realizing the extent of our dependence on technology, the world's countries signed the Treaty of Shanghai to govern cyberwarfare. As part of the accord, the UN was given greater authority to mediate disputes, in the hopes of preventing escalation in the future.

Following several natural disasters this year, the general assembly convened to discuss solutions. Investment in fusion energy was the main item on the docket, though I doubted any parties would commit beyond fancy words.

Despite my jaded view, as UN Secretary-General, my presence was mandatory at all of these events. I was zoned out while the Canadian ambassador spoke, nodding and smiling every now and then to keep up appearances. An aide tapped me on the shoulder, startling me out of my trance.

"Sir," she whispered. "I need you to come with me."

What was so important that it couldn't wait an hour? My staff were instructed to only approach in an emergency. There was the brief moment of worry, as I wondered whether there was a credible threat to my life. My security detail seemed relaxed though, so that likely was not the case.

I followed her into a briefing room, where several serious-looking individuals were waiting. The amount of military personnel present made me think that some conflict had erupted. The strange thing was that representatives of various space agencies were present, including ESA, NASA, and CNSA. The gears started to turn in my head. The first extrasolar mission had departed a few weeks ago, but they weren't supposed to return for months. Something must have gone wrong.

I settled down at the head of the mahogany table. “Quite the crowd we’ve got here. Could someone please fill me in?”

“The *Odyssey* crew made contact with extraterrestrials.” A short-haired woman in a leather jacket passed me a folder. Her nametag read *Dr. Kuemper, SETI.* “They call themselves the Venlil. According to our new friends, there are hundreds of other intelligent species out there. We’re not alone, Mr. Secretary. This is the biggest news of all time.”

I leafed through the dossier, taking a moment to process the news. The first page was a grainy image of the astronauts, standing with a group of Venlil. The aliens were bipedal, like us, but that was where the similarities ended. They had woolly gray fur, side-facing eyes, and spindly legs that bent inward. I wasn’t even sure if they had noses.

Any information released to the public needed to be handled with the utmost care. Science fiction had gotten people used to the idea of aliens, but the revelation of hundreds of species at once? That would shatter any notion of humanity being special. Some people would be frightened, and we needed to make sure they looked to us for the answers. The last thing we needed was for conspiracy theorists and UFO-hunters to take control of the discussion. The situation could devolve into a panic fast.

Not to mention how delicate communication with the aliens would be. Their culture was entirely new; we could offend them without even realizing. It was no small task ahead of us: learning their language, establishing diplomatic relations, and monitoring potential threats. It would be the work of an entire generation.

“I count at least forty generals in this room, which seems unnecessary,” I said at last. “Are the aliens friendly?”

Dr. Kuemper frowned. “It’s not so simple, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean? That shouldn’t be a hard question.” I had been expecting a ‘yes’, not a noncommittal reply. My heart sank as her implication hit me. “Either they’re friendly or they’re hostile.”

“The aliens are friendly, except for one species. That species is at war with the rest of the galaxy, and they’re quite the formidable foe. They wiped out 62 worlds, and fighting them has cost billions of lives.”

“They destroyed 62 planets…by themselves?! Jesus Christ. Please, tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish, sir. There’s a full brief on the page labeled ‘Arxur’ in your file. There’s also footage of them committing every war crime in the book. I mean, they literally eat children.”

“Shit. Let’s face it: we’re barely spacefaring. We need to hammer out alliances with the other aliens, pronto. I want every diplomat relegated to this project.”

“Well, that’s the thing.” Dr. Kuemper gave me an apologetic smile, as though she was about to give more bad news. How could this get any worse? “The Federation is afraid of us. The Venlil governor thinks they wouldn’t want our friendship, even with her blessing. In fact, she says they might attack us on sight.”

“Why exactly?” I asked.

“Humans are predators, and the only other intelligent predator…”

“Let me guess. The Arxur,” I sighed.

The SETI researcher nodded. With a heavy heart, I leaned back in my chair. Humans could be petty and violent, but even on our worst days, we didn’t eat children. You could at least give us that.

A bitter smirk played at my lips. “So I’m hearing not to invite the Venlil to the family barbecue. Yes, Doctor?”

Dr. Kuemper stifled a laugh. “And not to make that comment to them either, sir. I doubt they’d be amused. The poor furballs thought we were there to kill them.”

“But we won them over, didn’t we? Are you certain we can’t bring the Federation around too? I don’t like the odds, us taking on a technologically superior species alone.”

“I’m positive. Tarva was *quite* emphatic. Our astronauts say her primary concern was for the safety of Earth, as a whole. She believes there could be some…drastic overreactions. After what they’ve been through, I can’t say I blame them.”

In that case, humanity shouldn’t expect a welcome party from our neighbors. It was a shame our evolutionary link with the Arxur precluded that possibility, or even the prospect of civil relations. The fact that first contact hadn’t ended in violence was miraculous, by the sound of it. Things could have fallen apart without the

astronauts ever realizing why. We'd know only that the aliens attacked a research vessel without cause; this would be a very different briefing.

I made a mental note to give Governor Tarva a proper thanks, for staying her hand and filling us in. While I didn't want to rule out swaying the aliens, gambling with Earth's security was out of the question. Mankind were on our own against a genocidal scourge.

"Well then. This is the rare occasion I'm open to suggestion from the peanut gallery." My eyes locked with the American and Chinese generals, who appeared to be discussing something. "Do you have a proposal?"

General Zhao cleared his throat. "It's not all bad news. From what we've seen, the Federation's tactics and weaponry are subpar. We should spend a few months building a proper fleet and running joint exercises. I think if we catch the Arxur by surprise, we might stand a chance."

"I agree." General Jones offered a supportive nod, and I raised an eyebrow at her. This might be the first time I'd seen the US and China work together since the war. "Once we're ready, UN forces can coordinate an offensive. We've found several potential targets, including planets where sentients are bred as food."

"A ground assault is the perfect way to test our forces, without showing our hand. We don't want to overcommit," General Zhao added. "If we can liberate some Federation citizens and bring them home, it might buy us some good will."

"We all agree that these Arxur are a menace, but I must ask. Should we really get involved at all?" I paused, choosing my next words carefully. "So far, they've left us alone. By launching an attack, we'll be announcing our presence to those monsters. We drag Earth into a galactic war and risk untold human lives. Do we chance becoming dead world #63 for a bunch of aliens who hate us?"

"In my opinion, they'll come for us eventually. We either fight them now or we fight them later," General Jones replied. "The difference is, if we choose later, we won't have anyone to stand with us. The Federation is not faring well."

I grimaced. The Arxur's sadism was bound to awaken unsavory sentiments, when it was plastered across the airwaves. How were

we going to prevent widespread hysteria? My original plan was to break this discovery to the masses gradually, but with such a serious crisis, people deserved fair warning. After all, humanity's existence hinged on the decisions that were made today. I hoped the public could handle the truth.

"If we're going to do this, we need unity at home. People need to know what they're signing up for." I pressed a hand to my temple, trying to suppress a growing headache. "Release everything to the public, and let them make the decision. If there's broad support for a war, then we'll fight the bastards."

Perhaps the revelation of aliens would make us set aside our differences, and face this threat as a united species. As far as I knew, Earth only had one chance to get this right.

Chapter 6

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: August 21, 2136

The first humans to appear on a Venlil broadcast were concealed by a vac suit, and did not speak a word. The watching world had just crawled from our bunkers, only to find our leaders linking arms with predators. The immediate closure of the borders was the sole thing that prevented a mass exodus, and word from getting back to the Federation. There was a great deal of skepticism from the public, as Governor Tarva proclaimed that these beasts were peaceful. We were all waiting for them to throw their lot in with the Arxur and prove her wrong.

Instead, the United Nations pledged military aid days later, and showered Venlil Prime with food donations. Our citizens slowly warmed to the primates, touched by their outpouring of generosity. The sum of their good works quieted the voices calling for human extinction, for the most part. The Terran astronauts were relentless too, on a television tour espousing peace. Their behavior reflected well on their species as a whole.

But at the end of the day, few wanted to meet a predator in the flesh. As human volunteers took to the stars, the scientific communities of two worlds worked to smooth over our first interactions. We found ourselves inundated by Terran entertainment, granting us a peek behind their bestial exterior. The first literature Earth shared with us was *Frankenstein,* which I'm pretty sure was a thinly-veiled analogy.

How do you convince the world that you're not a monster, when they decide with a single glance?

The scientists decided it would make a difference mentally for us to bond, and to see them as people. A program was launched to talk to a human via text chat, no videos or images. Their appearance was the stuff of nightmares, so it was easier to start without that in mind.

Out of morbid curiosity, and perhaps some pity for Frankenstein's wretch, I had volunteered. The human I spoke to was named Marcel. He was a soldier with a dry sense of humor, a passion for

environmental causes, and a philosophical mind. Against the odds, I liked him; we became inseparable. I confided my deepest thoughts, and learned a great deal about Terran life in return.

We finally docked. God, that was terrifying, Marcel texted. *Longest four hours of my life.*

It'll be worth it. I'm excited to meet you, I replied.

Me too, bud. I know it won't be easy for you. If you need space, or it's too much, please tell me.

I will.

After weeks of distant communication, the final phase was exposure therapy. The plan was for us to room with our human counterpart for several days. I would be alone with a predator with no escape. They said once you got past the first few hours, the nerves would settle down. We needed to get used to the humans, if they were ever to be accepted.

What do you think I look like? Marcel asked. *In your head?*

I don't know. I try not to think about it.

Why not? You know what humans look like from TV.

Well, it's weird to think that you're a predator. That you look at a dead animal, all that blood and guts, and think, 'Hey, that's food.'

I'm a vegetarian, Slanek. Not applicable.

Gah…not you specifically. I mean humans in general. The fact that you're wired to think that's appetizing. To kill other animals for a meal.

It's not like that but…it's just evolution. Biology sucks.

It does. I guess I'll know what you look like soon, Marcel.

Yep. A face only a mother could love.

I snorted, amused in spite of myself. The clicking of boots down the hall meant the humans were in the building; there were mere seconds to brace myself. I switched off my holopad, and tried to regulate my breathing. We were allowing enough of them in to handily overtake this space station, if they were to try. These were social predators, so perhaps encouraging them to travel in packs wasn't the best idea…

The door swung open; I was flabbergasted by the imposing wall of muscle that entered. Something deep in my subconscious howled at

the sight of a predator, blocking my only escape route. Startling hazel eyes scanned my figure, and my breath hitched in my throat. Marcel's lips twitched for a moment, and I could tell from how he pursed them he didn't want to smile. We had been warned repeatedly about the humans' teeth-baring display of friendliness.

"Slanek." The voice was harsh and raspy, as though he was gargling saltwater. "I know the feeling's not mutual, but God, you're adorable."

I gritted my teeth, trying not to back away. "T-thanks. C-come in."

The human saw that I had set my belongings on the bottom bunk, and tossed his duffel bag on top. *Well, this isn't that bad,* I thought. There had been no sudden movements, he was keeping his distance, and he didn't have the razor teeth of the Arxur. With his back to me, I couldn't see his piercing eyes. All positives. My heart was hammering in my chest, but I had kept myself together.

"Jeesh, I'm starving," the human announced, as he began to unpack.

There were few words I would've liked to hear less. Isolated in close quarters with a hungry "vegetarian" predator…aw fuck, why had I signed up for this? The nearest meal was obviously me. I skittered backward on instinct, trying to shield my throat.

Marcel frowned. "I was just going to suggest that we grab a bite together. Or, uh, I brought snacks. We can share."

"Sorry," I squeaked.

The human retrieved a plastic bag from his belongings, and popped it open with a single tug. He withdrew a yellow wafer, shoving it down his gullet. As he turned the bag to face me, I eyed the offering suspiciously.

"It's a potato chip," he said, before I could ask. "Baked from a Terran plant."

Did I trust the predator enough to consume his foodstuff? How did I know it wasn't dried animal fat? I tried to remind myself that this was my friend. The one who gave me relationship advice and told silly jokes. My stomach squirmed as I grasped a chip, but I placed it in my mouth anyways. It was salty and starchy, yet strangely addictive.

My ears twitched with pleasant surprise. “That’s good.”

“Isn’t it?” Marcel mumbled, through a mouthful of food. “I figure we could use some carbs, before these…ugh, *experiments* you want us in.”

“They mentioned something about that. It’s psychological research, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Your scientists just mentioned it was a test. The UN signed off on it, so I’d hope it’s ethical.”

“They probably just want to be sure you don’t want to eat us.”

“I’ll pass with flying colors then. Not sure where the lab is though.”

“Uh, I’ll take you there.”

“Great. Let’s get it over with, shall we?”

Once the fright began to subside, speaking to Marcel felt less forced. It tickled my instincts, but not in a way my conscious brain couldn’t override. A little discomfort was nothing I couldn’t handle. It wasn’t like he had actually done anything to threaten me, or diverged from his online persona in a noticeable way. Chatting via text was easier, but it was unfair to ostracize the humans forever. The predators had been understanding enough as things were.

Unless any red flags were uncovered in their psychological screening, Terran soldiers would accompany Venlil ships on today’s mid-rotation patrols. It was possible UN Peacekeepers would remain as permanent fixtures in our crew. In that case, I would be relieved to have a conclusive answer on the workings of the human mind. Predators were known to toy with their prey in nature. The more intelligent they were, the more sadistic and deceptive they could be.

I tried not to think about what I would do, if I found out Marcel’s niceties were a long con. There were a few humans present at the lab, probably to monitor the methods used for research. Sara, who I recognized as a lingering visitor from the UN first contact team, was hunched over a microscope. She seemed to be analyzing some cell samples with a Venlil scientist, and waved at us as we entered.

“Welcome!” How Sara sensed us, with her lack of peripheral vision, was beyond me. “Here for the behavioral exam?”

“Uh, yep. I think,” my roommate grumbled.

“Excellent. Just sign the consent form, and then speak to Ilja here.”

Sara gestured toward the Venlil hovering beside her. “Don’t worry. It’ll be quick.”

Marcel hesitated before scrawling his name on the dotted line. I noted how thin and frail his fingers looked, for a predator; they were like spindly twigs. Either my imagination was running amok, or his hands quivered as he set the pen down. The humans looked terrifying to us, but I couldn’t picture them going toe-to-toe with the Arxur.

Before the ink dried on his signature, Ilja was strapping Marcel to a chair. The restraints seemed excessive for a consensual test. Electrodes were fastened to his skull, and his shirt was removed to tape a series of wires to his chest. Clips placed on his fingers fed additional data to a vitals monitor. I noticed the human growing more agitated, the more equipment he was hooked up to. The rise and fall of his chest had quickened dramatically.

“Don’t leave, Slanek. Please,” he pleaded. “This is making me nervous as hell.”

A sympathetic ache filled my chest cavity. It was strange to think that the predator was afraid of us, but I hated seeing a friend in distress. What were our scientists testing, exactly? Guarantees were necessary to cement trust in these creatures, but I was worried about what would be done to achieve that. It looked as though they were planning to elicit a violent reaction from Marcel. Human subjects deserved proper treatment, not to be goaded into retaliation.

Why do I feel so protective of him? I mused. *I haven’t known him that long.*

“It’s going to be okay, Marc.” I waved my tail reassuringly. “They won’t hurt you. I promise.”

The human furrowed his brow. “But you’ll stay?”

“Of course. I’ll be here.”

Marcel relaxed, and the twinge in my chest deepened. The sentiments I felt in this moment suggested that, despite the inherent risk, it was possible to grow attached to a predator. Whether humanity was sincere in its friendship, or if that was a one-sided delusion, remained to be seen.

Chapter 7

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: August 21, 2136

The patrol ship drifted along the Federation border, dispelling fuel into the endless night. A brooding Marcel sat at the helm, under my supervision. Human pilots had no real-world experience flying ships; their only insight to interplanetary battles were clumsy simulations back home. Perhaps it was unfair to hurl them into the war out of desperation, as unprepared as they were.

I couldn't stop thinking about the results of the experiments, and how revolutionary the findings would be when broadcast. Marcel bolted from the lab in a sweat-soaked stupor, and I made a judgment call to give him some time to regain his senses. In his absence, Ilja shared a cumulative AI analysis of all human subjects. A larger sample size was needed to validate the findings, but it was enough to put my mind at ease.

We had proof that humans *felt* empathy.

The predators were recorded doing things they claimed to enjoy as a baseline for pleasure: eating sugary snacks, listening to their favorite song, playing games, and so on. A variety of other metrics were assessed for comparison, including boredom and anger. Then, they were shown videos of the Arxur torturing our children.

Interestingly enough, the regions of their brain that were activated were most similar to the baseline for physical pain (which we determined through finger pricking). Some human participants were so disturbed by the videos that they had to leave the room. That even manifested itself in physical symptoms, such as elevated heart rate and vomiting.

Much to my relief, the restraints proved an unnecessary precaution. Venlil xenobiologists were worried that violent footage might trigger predatory instincts, and that humans could experience a lapse in control. They wanted to avoid having to put a Terran subject down, if they lashed out; it was best for everyone's safety.

My gaze flickered over to Marcel, curiosity brimming in my chest. The human was evidently lost in thought as well. His face was bright red, as he cast a smoldering stare at the floorboards. I was

worried he was going to rip his own hair out, with how he was tugging at the coarse auburn strands. Perhaps I should leave it alone, but I was dying to know his thoughts.

“If I may ask— what frightened you about our scientists?” I blurted out. “Did you really think they would hurt you? We don’t have the same disposition as you.”

“You’re going to laugh but…most of our old myths about aliens… um…”

“Yes?”

“Well, they involve us getting abducted and experimented on. Hey, for all I knew, you were testing how humans react to torture.”

“You think we’re that barbaric?! Our scientists just want to help you fit in. We need conclusive evidence of your empathetic capacity. Else, we’ll never silence the doubters.”

“I don’t see why we needed to prove, yet again, that we’re not the Arxur. Humans haven’t done anything to you.”

“You’re a contradiction of hundreds of years of scientific thought, Marc. Not to mention, certain groups in the Federation won’t like you, much more than us. They’ll demand proof, and I’m not sure even the finest scientific rigor will withstand their scrutiny. It’s not fair. I know.”

The human was silent, directing an intense glare at the scanner feed. The subspace readings were blank, with no indicators of activity beside our own. If there was anything to be gleaned, it wasn’t on an empty screen. Maybe the experiments had jarred something in his personality after all, because I never remembered him being so sullen online. If we needed to abandon the patrol and return to base, I’d like to know sooner rather than later. Before he endangered himself, or others.

“Are you alright?” I patted the human on the shoulder, and felt him stiffen beneath my paw. “I know that footage disturbed you…and I’m sorry.”

Marcel sighed. “No, I’m sorry. I’m furious, but not with you. I want to wring my hands around an Arxur’s neck.”

“I don’t see how that would improve anything.”

“At least I’d be doing something.”

“You’re here. You’re protecting us.”

“Yes. Someone has to put a stop to their reign of terror. There’s been no issue recruiting people back on Earth. The way the grays get off on tormenting children, it sickens us. Why are they like that?”

“I wanted to ask you that, Marc. We believed that predators evolve through warfare. Killing and cruelty—isn’t it a survival advantage to you?”

“Well…killing, yes. Killing the competition, or the dangerous things that lurk in the night; I suppose that’s how we became predators. We aren’t natural ones, you know. We were once prey animals, same as you, using our cooperation to survive.”

“What?! And you *chose* to be l-like *them*?!”

“Yep. I won’t pretend we’re cute and cuddly like you. Some people have walked ghastly paths throughout our history. There’s plenty of blood on our hands. But in modern times, we have rules for war called the Geneva Conventions. The Arxur’s methods are dishonorable and pathetic.”

Before I could inquire as to the nature of these “Geneva Conventions”, shrill alarms blared from the ship’s computer. Nine indicators popped up on the scanner feed, suggesting inbound Arxur bombers. The flurry of activity, when the humans arrived, must have piqued their interest. The reptilians loved to target weak links, and an isolated station such as our lodging was just that.

There were countermeasures, developed over the centuries, but I didn’t know if they’d be sufficient today. Our onboard AI could map the enemy’s trajectory, then time a warp-disruptor pulse with that information. Once we knocked the grays out of hyperspace, our directive was to scamper off until reinforcements arrived. Slowing the Arxur’s progress bought valuable minutes, even without a confrontation. It could mean the difference between catastrophic loss of life and a successful defense.

I switched on the comms link. “Prime Outpost, we’re reading nine Arxur bombers en route. Figure they have you as their target.”

“Fuck. We have to stop them at all costs.” The exhaustion was evident in the male Venlil’s voice that answered. I couldn’t imagine how much stress the officers were under, monitoring the UN

arrivals. “The first large transport of humans, and a couple hundred wind up dead? They’ll never forgive us. They’ll never send anyone again…”

“Um, sir, my human partner can hear you,” I said.

“Oh. Right. This is General Kam from Venlil Command, we copy you. I’ll ask the humans to position their so-called ‘fighters’ on an intercept course, while we evacuate personnel here. Stall for time if you can.”

I drew a shaky breath. “Yes, sir. We’ll do our best.”

Nausea swelled in my throat, as I synced the ship computer with the disruptor beacons lining the border. My mind strayed to its usual dark corner: replaying my brother’s funeral. The shock was still as fresh as it was months ago, when I first learned that his transport ship was gunned down. There wasn’t a trace left to remember him by; no body to recover.

Would I be the next to fall by the Arxur’s claws?

Every instinct told me to flee; to put as much distance between us and those monsters as possible. However, the pulses needed to be timed down to the nanosecond, which meant our proximity was a necessity. My brain felt overstimulated, as if my senses were set aflame.

Being around a human for hours…it’s pushed me to my limit. It’s hard to think, with my nerves all frazzled. I pondered with a tinge of guilt. *How selfish I am. I haven’t even considered how Marc is feeling.*

I hoped the wordless Marcel was okay with the peril we were in. He had loved ones back on Earth, including a fiancé whom he spoke of with fondness. He didn’t want to die here. There was no data on how the primates behaved in life-threatening situations, or how they coped with stress.

But with the grays closing in on our position, there was no time to explain our standard procedure. We thought there’d be time for our allies to settle in, before hurling them into the fire. Hopefully, humans had solid self-preservation instincts, and could use their cleverness to fill in the blanks. Those bombers were about to become quite real.

There were no visible signs of distortion as our pulse detonated. The AI’s calculation was silent and flawless. I’d liken FTL disruption to

pulling a rug out beneath someone's feet. The warp bubble burst in an instant, plunging the Arxur vessels into real space. No doubt it was disorienting for those hellspawn on board.

Watching their angular ships spring forth from nothingness would be a magical sight, if the stakes weren't so dire. The bombers slowed to regain their bearings, and to scope out their surroundings. They wished to exact revenge on the prey animal who dared to fight back.

It was evident Arxur architects spared no thought for beauty. Plasma railguns jutted out on both flanks, perfect for slinging destructive volleys. Turrets for kinetic weapons dotted the armor, in case of a close-range engagement. The curvature of the underbelly provided storage for anti-matter missiles. I imagine the predators relished the terror their constructs instilled. Witnessing their fleet felt like peering into the jaws of death.

"Hideous ships, huh?" I quipped.

There was no reply from Marcel. I would suspect he froze in fear, if I hadn't seen his hands tighten around the steering column. An uneasy feeling crept into my mind. Every creature handled stress differently, but his behavior was off by a long shot. *C'mon Slanek. The grays are the threat here,* I scolded myself. *Not the human.*

"Knock knock. Anyone home?" I tried to keep my voice playful, but I was desperate to snap the human out of his trance. "You do see their ships, and realize we're alone? There is safety in numbers. It's time to head back to base."

Marcel leaned forward, fangs protruding in a menacing snarl. I noted with abject horror how his eyes dilated, and his canines glistened with saliva. If that was an expression of happiness, why was it appearing when our territory was under siege?

"Marc, we need to flee. Now." I shook the human on the shoulder, but he shrugged me off. "Marc? Shit man, they definitely s-spotted us. MARCEL!! Floor it… I beg you."

"EAT THIS MOTHERFUCKERS!" Marcel roared, disregarding me entirely.

The human did floor it: to charge in the direction of the Arxur fleet. *What happened?! He went berserk; he was so lucid minutes ago!*

I tried to scream a plea to stop, but it came out as an incoherent

yelp. The predator either didn't know how, or didn't bother to prime the targeting system. He jammed a clawless finger on the firing trigger, spraying plasma rounds with impunity. The glaring aggression seemed to take the grays by surprise; it marked a drastic shift from a Venlil's typical flightiness.

A few glancing blows struck the lead ship, jolting its pitch. One must have impacted the propulsion system, since its drive-plume flickered out. Marcel turned the stream of fire toward the crippled vessel's brethren. Some hits connected at random, though the Arxur seemed more pissed off than wounded. We made a swooping pass across the formation, before banking heavily in the direction from which we came. The computer warned me that we had been target-locked by all nine hostiles.

"Run?" I whimpered.

Marcel cleared his throat. "Yep. Good idea."

The human pointed the ship in the direction of the Federation border. Why wasn't he trying to return to the outpost? The last remnants of my logical brain suggested that he was trying to lure the Arxur away. I winced as my harness chafed into my neck. Our inertial dampeners were struggling to keep up with our blistering acceleration.

Only two Arxur ships gave chase, while the rest returned to their intended course. They couldn't resist sending someone to hunt a straggler down. I knew the enemy bombers would slowly close the gap, with relentless abandon. The optimal way to lose our pursuers was to slip into subspace, but unfortunately, warp required several minutes of stationary preparation. The human signed our death warrant with his stupidity.

Our puny ship gunned away from safety, with a pair of apex predators in hot pursuit.

Chapter 8

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: August 21, 2136

Making an enemy of a starship captain was ill-advised, even in these trying times.

My astonishment, at being evicted from Venlil territory by force, still hadn't faded. There was no reason for flagrant disrespect, especially when we were responding to their cry for help. When Governor Tarva started waving missiles around, it felt personal. It was fair to say I harbored a permanent grudge against them.

Tarva's behavior could be chalked up as war-induced psychosis, if not for the mayhem that followed. Without a word as to why, the Venlil withdrew from the Federation's military. Their borders were sealed, cutting off crucial supplies and outposts. Any ships seeking entry were turned back at gunpoint. Alien diplomats and visitors were barred from leaving Venlil space, or even contacting their homeworlds.

It was like something from a dystopian novel. Division in our ranks was the last thing we needed, with how the Arxur had been pressing lately. A diplomatic resolution was the desired outcome to any crisis, if at all possible.

But when it took begging for the Venlil to provide proof of life, it didn't seem there was room for negotiation. Tarva hadn't offered any timeframe, terms, or conditions for a release. This was no temporary standoff either. It had been over a month, and none of their actions were rescinded. The Federation were a lot of dithering idiots, afraid of ruffling feathers, but even their patience had limits.

Major players, including my own Gojidi Union, were incensed at our people's hostage status. Judging by the protests across the galaxy, I wasn't the only one who felt compelled to take matters into my own paws. Whatever the Venlil Republic was hiding, I was determined to get to the bottom of it.

"Sovlin." Piri, the Gojid prime minister, sighed in irritation. She must have seen my eyes glass over. "You still with me? Or are you off plotting revenge in that thick head of yours?"

I blinked several times. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“…As I was saying, I’m disappointed in you. You went off snooping on the Venlil, without permission, and used Federation resources to do so. What do you have to say for yourself?” Piri asked.

“I haven’t crossed their border.” I pointed a claw at the viewport, toward the invisible threshold. “If we decide to break our people out by force, we need the facts. The Federation has a right to know what the Venlil are up to.”

“What makes you think they’re up to anything?”

“Tarva isn’t stupid enough to commit diplomatic suicide. Not without cause. I mean, the resolution condemning their actions passed by unanimous vote. She’s lucky we haven’t done more than place their membership on probation.”

Piri tilted her head, weighing the circumstances for herself. Shutting down all communication overnight and banning travel looked draconian to me. The drastic nature of it all did not make sense; I couldn’t fathom what quelled the populace’s rebellion. The entire galaxy was iced out for an unknown transgression; even the Venlil’s closest allies were left baffled and in the dark. Talk of warfare was brewing, as much as the Federation wished for it not to be so.

Why would Tarva invite such extreme fallout? What could make losing every partner worth it?

“I don’t disagree. The Venlil would need a serious incentive to draw our ire,” the politician said. “They’ve always been loyal to the Federation, until now. What’s your take?”

“Well, I would think it was cowardice, if they had run off,” I growled. “It’s as though they’re *trying* to make enemies of us!”

“It can’t be that. Not with the Arxur breathing down their necks, every hour of every day.” Piri focused her gaze on me, a disapproving glint in her eyes. “I should reprimand you, Sovlin, but I’d like some answers myself. What have you learned through your… prying?”

“The Venlil are still letting *someone* into their territory. I’m not sure if it’s a Federation member. A group of transports docked at a fringe outpost today. They weren’t chased away like the rest of us.”

“And you’re sure they were allowed to stay?”

“I’m positive. They got an escort from the ceremonial fleet. Tarva’s personal parade! I’m just not close enough to make out their subspace origin. Not, er, without crossing the border.”

“So that’s why you called me now. You want my blessing, in case you get caught, and I hear about it the hard way.”

“That’s one way of putting it, ma’am. May I poke around?”

“Ugh, very well. I want a report as soon as you learn anything. And Sovlin…don’t make me regret this.”

The video feed cut out. I eyed the space ahead of us with giddiness, and gave my first officer a tail thump that meant proceed. The posting was filled by Recel, a veteran of the Kolshian Commonwealth. There would be no objections to my plan from him. His allegiance was to the Federation first, and unveiling the truth about the Venlil’s misdeeds was in the collective interest. Anyone with eyes could see that their behavior was off.

The crew leapt into action, as Recel declared a new course for the fringes of Venlil space. We could hide behind the guise that we were patrolling and strayed into their territory by mistake. All I needed was to get in range for our signal interceptors. Local broadcasts could offer some clues, if subspace readings proved unattainable.

Our warship pivoted, angling us toward the forbidden region. I settled down in the captain’s chair and monitored the bridge. We would drift over the border gradually, in the interest of stealth. If we were able to pull this mission off, I would be acclaimed for my initiative. Satisfaction swelled in my chest, at the thought of adding to my repute.

“Sir. You might want to look at the scanner data!” Recel barked. “Venlil patrol ship, heading straight for us.”

I slammed my paw down in frustration. “We’re still on our side of the border! They can’t object to us patrolling our own damn space.”

According to the computer, the patrol vessel was on an intercept course toward us. The sensor data suggested their speed was at max velocity, well above all safety recommendations. They were going to burn out their own engines, pushing them to that degree! How had they gotten wise to our plans? My call with Prime Minister Piri was encrypted, so I didn’t see how they could’ve listened in.

“Radio silence from that little boat,” Recel noted. “What do you want to do?”

My spines bristled. “Order them to change course at once, and have weapons on stand-by. We’re not going to let that shit-heap stop us.”

With the viewport on the highest magnification, I could make out a tiny dot racing toward our position. Its course was erratic, as though the stabilizers were close to giving out. Several hails had gone unanswered, and the Venlil ship failed to deviate from its course.

The patrol vessel paid no regard to the border, breezing into our territory without any deceleration. Silence fell over the bridge; the tension was palpable. I knew my crew still felt some sense of attachment to the Venlil, after years of steadfast alliance. It was for their sake that I wasn’t striking this craft down on the spot.

“Fire a warning shot, and hail them one final time,” I ordered. “If there’s no acknowledgment, I want them finished.”

Three plasma rounds were lobbed just above the patrol ship’s flight path. Its pace slowed, as though the pilot was second-guessing their decisions. The hesitation was brief though; it returned to its stubborn sprint moments later. Had the Venlil fallen victim to some neurological plague?! That would explain everything.

I gritted my teeth. “Kill them. They need to be taught a lesson.”

“Wait, sir. We’re detecting two more vessels on their tail…Arxur bombers,” my first officer said.

At last, a decent explanation for why the Venlil refused to turn back. If those reptile bastards were after them, I suppose there was no retreating. Why they were unresponsive to our hails was another question, especially with the delicate situation between our species.

The patrol ship’s engine sputtered, and the pilot coaxed it to a resting position. The vessel swiveled around to face the Arxur bombers. It looked like an insect compared to any warship, yet its size did not prove a deterrent. As soon as the enemy pursuers became visible, it began hurling plasma rounds in their direction. The caliber was insufficient to trade blows with the grays, but the helmsman didn’t seem to care. The coughing engine was prodded back to life…to give them a push in the enemy’s direction?

Yep, neurological plague. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.

The Republic craft dipped down to avoid return fire, and pressed on with its advance. In spite of myself, I was impressed with the pilot's ability to overpower their instincts. Whatever my personal feelings toward the Venlil, this bravery was unmistakable; and to be honest, very unlike them. Their accuracy was lacking, however, and the Arxur ships absorbed any hits that landed.

"Sir, should we intervene?" my first officer asked.

"How many times have we saved them already?" I grumbled. "And for what?"

Recel wagged a grasper at me. "You wouldn't let the Arxur kill innocent people, over a grudge with Tarva."

"I suppose not. Advance on the Arxur bombers, and line them up with the railguns."

I could sense the crew's relief from their eagerness to carry out the new orders. Perhaps they had been worried that my previous threat to let the grays eat the Venlil was serious? It would take a more depraved captain than I to spectate a predator's hunt.

The lights on the bridge dimmed, which was confirmation that the railgun was charging. In high enough doses, a blast of concentrated energy could chew through even Arxur armor. There was a reason the Federation invested in such slow, gargantuan ships. Powering effective weapons required a large backbone.

A radiant beam sailed through the inky sky, connecting with an enemy vessel. Pleasure rolled down my spines as our plasma lanced through the engine. There was one Arxur bomber finished in a fiery flash. Our railgun would take several seconds to recharge, so I hoped the Venlil ship could hang on a little longer.

The pilot's crazed maneuvers could only do so much for evasion. The final enemy was spewing quite the plasma torrent at them, unrelenting in their hunt. One round clipped the patrol ship on the bow. It lurched forward, and sat dazed in the Arxur's sights. My crew's efforts to rouse the railgun gained a new sense of urgency.

The reptilians rounded on our former allies, salivating to deliver the finishing blow. The Venlil were wounded further by a clean hit to the propulsion system. The drive-plume flickered out, and the patrol ship laid paralyzed. Without mobility, a vessel was a floating tomb. The pilot's fire had ceased too; there was no telling if they had lost

weapons, or if it meant the worst.

A surge of relief flooded my chest, as our weapons flashed back online. There wasn't a second to spare, or any margin for error; the crew scrambled to unleash our hellfire. An energy lance penetrated the night sky, and I prayed that it would arrive in time. While the Venlil were traitors, I preferred them to the affront to sapience known as the Arxur.

Our railgun strike pierced the Arxur's shell, splicing them clean in half. With its dying breath, the predators discharged a barrage of plasma; a parting gift for their quarry. There was nothing we could do to intervene. All eyes turned to the unfolding scene with collective horror. The Venlil craft was idle, dead in the waters.

The fireballs bore down on the cruiser, one after the other, closing the distance in a blur. Somehow, our sensors didn't record a direct impact. The blistering shots shaved its hull, straying wide by a hair's breath. I imagine the occupants could all but smell the smoke.

Talk about a near miss, I mused. *The railgun must've jolted the Arxur just enough.*

Cheers echoed through the bridge, though the celebration was premature to me. The Venlil ship sustained serious damage, and wasn't showing any signs of activity.

"Venlil ship, do you copy?" I asked over the comms frequency. "We can send medical assistance if needed."

There was silence. My opportunism flickered back to life, as I remembered the purpose of our foray. Nobody had communicated with anyone inside Republic borders for weeks. This was the perfect opportunity to force the Venlil to talk; to discover the truth behind their reclusiveness. We could start by asking some questions about the mysterious visitors.

"If you can hear me, Venlil ship, you are now in the custody of the Galactic Federation. Any attempt to flee will be met with extreme force, as will any efforts at resistance." I paused, making sure to emphasize my last words. "Prepare to be boarded."

Chapter 9

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: August 21, 2136

A contingent of Federation soldiers blasted into the patrol ship, keen to unravel its secrets. I was relieved that the Venlil opted not to barricade the main hatch. With their recent obstinance, I figured they'd make our entry a drawn-out process.

There were five others beside myself, a crowd for the tiny ship. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. There didn't appear to be substantial damage to the ship's interior, but I didn't hear any vocalization from the occupants. It became a priority to locate the passengers, and determine if they needed medical attention.

I spotted a Venlil slumped in the rear seat, with blood dripping down his forehead. Judging by the wound's location, his head was tossed into the ship frame during one of the Arxur's strikes. It was possible he had been knocked out prior, from fear or shock. Those injuries required extensive treatment, if it was severe enough for him to remain unconscious.

The sound of heavy breathing drew my attention, and my eyes darted toward the pilot's chair. The creature's form was mostly void of fur, if the bits of pinkish skin that peeked through its garments were an indicator. The sole hair clump was a mop of red fuzz on its head, which cut off near its neck line. With its back to us, I couldn't make out any more about its features.

Was this the species that docked at the station earlier? It didn't look like any lifeform I'd stumbled across in my travels, so that ruled out it being a Federation member.

Something about it made my skin crawl. Maybe it was just the lack of hair that made it look freakish? Its skin looked soft, lacking any sort of natural armor or defenses. Its stature wasn't impressive either; only a touch taller than myself.

"What are you?" I growled.

"Uh, I'm Marcel. Just a guy. Nice to meet you?" he offered. "Please,

um, help Slanek. He's injured."

I sighed in irritation. "Fine. But why the fuck weren't you answering our hails? We almost blasted you out of the sky."

"I didn't know how to use the comms system. My buddy was unconscious, er, in shock I think." Marcel's voice was low and breathy; he seemed to be hyperventilating. "This is my first time flying one of these."

"You'd never flown one of these ships before? And you fly *like that?*"

"Like what?"

"Never mind. Turn around and come with us."

"I can't do that."

How dense could a person be? This was not a negotiation. These two were in no position to argue with us. My boarding notification was explicit enough in stating that they were our prisoners, not our guests. My attempts to be sensitive, and not wave guns around the second we stepped in, clearly hadn't paid dividends.

"Marcel, I wasn't asking," I hissed. "If you expect us to help your friend, you better comply."

"Let's just talk for a moment, okay?" The peculiar pilot raised his hands over his head slowly, but kept his head pointed toward the viewport. "L-listen, I'm not your enemy. I don't want you to shoot me. I don't want to hurt you…or whatever it is you all say."

"You think you could hurt us? You are surrounded and alone."

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm just…not like the Arxur. We're on the same team, okay?"

"What is this nonsense? Your rambling is madness. Don't tell me you're going into shock too?"

Marcel drew a shaky breath, and turned his head slowly toward us. The crewmate nearest to him staggered backward, reaching for her sidearm. She tripped over the lifeless Slanek in her retreat, and discharged her weapon in a panic. The round ended up buried in the ceiling, punching a hole in the already-battered ship.

Firing plasma guns, and demonstrating reckless trigger discipline, in a contained spaceship?! The damn thing was venting atmosphere as

we spoke. The crewmate earned a scorching glare from me; I was appalled with her behavior.

“WHAT HAS GOTTEN INTO YOU?” I screeched. “Holster your weapon at once. I’ll have you disciplined for your—”

“Captain Sovlin…” another crewmate interrupted in a squeaky whisper. “L-look. It’s one of them.”

My gaze flitted back over to Marcel. Shock stabbed at my heart; my insides twisted into knots. The pilot sported binocular vision, just like the Arxur. A cruel intelligence glistened through his beady eyes, even as he tried to avert them. Every time he directed his gaze at someone, it felt like they were being tracked. His inky pupils were no more than dilated pools of hunger.

The pieces fell together, as I gaped at Marcel dumbfounded. A feral hunter on a Republic ship could only mean one thing. The Venlil home world was occupied by an army of predators, and in all likelihood, their species was enslaved. These beasts must be the reason for that distress signal a few weeks ago.

Perhaps I owed the Venlil an apology, since I had misjudged them so terribly. The tragedy they endured was unspeakable.

The monsters probably threatened to kill their entire populace if they tried anything, which was why Tarva betrayed us. Her decision-making was still terrible, but something I could forgive. Chasing the Federation armada off under duress was different to abandoning her friends.

The resentment festering inside of me dissipated in an instant, replaced by a burning hatred. We had never gotten our paws on one of the reptiles, so we’d have to settle for the next best thing. I would not let Marcel’s species follow in the Arxur’s footsteps. I would make them pay for everything they had done, tenfold.

Marcel’s hands trembled, and he closed his eyes. “Guys, I’m just here to fight the Arxur. What they’ve done is despicable, and we would never—”

“QUIET! Get on the ground.” My voice was cold and assertive, as I raised my sidearm at him. “Don’t shoot him, unless he pushes us. I want him alive.”

The predator obeyed, sprawling out prone on the floor. He was lying flat on his stomach, so his eyes were facing the ground. He

linked his dexterous digits behind his head, as though to prove he wouldn't take a swipe at us.

My soldiers gave me an expectant look, waiting for orders. Did they presume I had the answer to everything? There was nothing in the book about predators hiding in plain sight. But if I didn't take command, there was going to be a total collapse of control. The last thing I wanted was my unit fleeing, and leaving this creature on the loose in our territory.

"Protect Slanek until medical assistance arrives," I said, gesturing toward the unconscious Venlil. "Get him out of here, and somewhere safe. Be gentle with him when he wakes. Make sure he knows he's free, and that he never has to see this monster again."

Marcel stiffened. "Free? Slanek is…"

"Another word and I'll kill you. Don't tempt me, freak."

Summoning my innermost courage, I approached the predator with a pair of restraints. There was no other person I trusted not to freak out, if he twitched or spoke. The creature didn't move, only sucking in erratic breaths. His submissive behavior was odd, but he could be baiting me within proximity. I needed to keep my wits about me, and stay prepared for a surprise attack.

I knelt down over Marcel's back, pinning him to the ground with my hind legs. One paw held the barrel of my pistol against his neck, while the other paw reached for his hands. The sensation of my fur brushing his skin made me flinch. I couldn't snap the manacles around his wrist fast enough.

Behind us, two crewmates crouched by Slanek, shooting glances toward the predator as they did. It was apparent they wanted to get as far away from him as possible. We had to wait for the ship medic to arrive with a stretcher and drugs though. If the Venlil had spinal damage, it was too risky to transport him without professional supervision.

That said, the damn doctor was taking his sweet time arriving. I was the one stuck guarding a novel predator, absorbing the full brunt of the terror. The minutes standing by Marcel seemed to drag; it was agony, even as he remained compliant and silent. Part of me wanted to put a bullet in his brain and be done with it.

"You're pressing way too hard on the prisoner's abdomen." A

disapproving voice drifted from the ship's entrance, earning a relieved sigh from me. Doctor Zarn strode in, scanning the scene. "What is going on here, Captain?"

"Don't ask. I need a sedative, now," I replied.

"For a new species? We have no idea which drugs are safe, or how they could interact with its nervous system. I can't sign onto this."

I rolled Marcel onto his back, and Zarn's eyes widened. The doctor dropped his kit to the floor and stood frozen for several seconds. It took a pointed cough from me to snap him out of his stupor. The medic drew a shuddering breath, trying to compose himself. He was quivering as he filled a syringe, and inched toward us like he was on cracked ice.

I extended an arm as far as I could, and snatched the sedative from his outstretched paw. Zarn darted back to a safer distance, muttering several curses. He gave Slanek a brief examination, feeling the vertebrae of his spine. At the doctor's go-ahead, the soldiers moved the Venlil onto a stretcher.

My eyes shifted back to the predator, whose gaze bore directly up into my skull. Turning him over for the doctor to see might not have been the best idea, since it meant his face was visible again. Well, Marcel wasn't going to sedate himself, was he?

"Fucking hell. Here goes nothing," I growled.

I found a large vein in the predator's neck, and brought the syringe toward it. Marcel shrank back into the floor, possibly mistaking the pointed blade for a weapon. It was doubtful his species had any concept of medicine. With a quick motion, I jabbed the needle into his pale skin.

Marcel winced, and those awful eyes flickered shut. I finally allowed myself to feel my emotions, and doubled over, panting. My gun slipped from my paws; it took everything to bite back a scream. I couldn't lose my composure in front of the crew.

"Captain. Listen, you've had a terrible shock, and the most exposure of anyone," Doctor Zarn said in a soft tone. "Let your first officer step in. You need to rest. You're risking cardiac arrest if you push yourself any further."

"Let Recel call the shots? Over my dead body," I snorted. "I will be the one to tell Piri, and to move this thing to a holding cell."

The doctor flicked his ears in disdain. “Yes, it’s a terrible creature. I didn’t think any humans were still alive.”

“Any what?”

“Humans. That’s what it is.”

“We knew about these demons before?!”

“Indeed. You know, the predator race we discovered after the Arxur? The Federation glosses over it, but *surely* you’ve heard it mentioned.”

“The extinct ones?”

“Clearly not that extinct. We were certain humans killed themselves off, though. The number of explosions on their planet was astronomical. It was a fitting ending for a species that tormented each other, and lived in constant battle.”

“What do you think they’ve done to the Venlil?”

“Humans are conquerors, who derive pleasure from dominating others. That is what their ‘explorers’ have always done on their homeworld. They are aggressive, brutal, and territorial. Every bit as savage as the grays. You can fill in the blanks, Captain.”

“Dear stars. I should wonder how you know such detail, Doctor. Enough to recognize one.”

“I researched humans for my bioethics thesis.”

“Of course you did,” I said in a derisive tone. “I bet you argued it was worth saving them, because a doctor’s oath is to saving *all* lives.”

“On the contrary. The Federation developed plans to raze their planet, Earth, which were scrapped after their presumed extinction. My paper argued that some animals are not worth saving; that not all life is equivalent. Killing humanity would’ve been justified for the greater good. It was our moral obligation to follow through, even.”

“I never thought I’d hear those words from you, Zarn. Humans must be irredeemable.” I glowered at Marcel’s lifeless form. My mind was buzzing with thoughts of a fiery raid on this *Earth*. “Well then, I suppose it’s time to tell Piri we have unfinished business.”

Chapter 10

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: August 22, 2136

Word of the Arxur attack on our space station reached Venlil Prime via the media first. I suspected the camera crews sent to document the humans' arrival were able to get a messenger ship out before the confrontation. Details were scarce, but the first duel between predators in space made for flashy headlines.

In all honesty, I was curious how humans would fare against the grays as anyone. I was clinging to some far-fetched hope that they'd swoop in and save the day.

There was no telling whether the station was still standing. Research outposts didn't have meaningful defenses, since our fiercest protection was assigned to colonies and planets. The humans needed to save their own hide against the Arxur.

Maybe we should've hosted the UN delegation on Venlil Prime, but the idea was to assimilate them in increments. Having predators walking the streets, dining in restaurants, and smiling at schoolchildren was a bit much for the public. I felt guilty anyways, for leaving our human friends in a vulnerable location. In trying to shield them, I might've gotten them killed.

Terran technology was primitive, and while they excelled at dogfights in atmospheric conditions, I suspected their ships weren't attuned to space yet. They were in the process of building a new armada from scratch. The craft deployed to the station were there for emergencies, and were little more than prototypes.

There was profound relief when Kam messaged me, stating that he was in orbit along with two UN generals. My military advisor promised a full briefing, and assured me that the station was still standing. I was relieved to hear that there were survivors, but also wondered how the human ships had performed.

"Hi, Tarva!" a predator's voice pierced my ears.

Noah's arrival at the governor's mansion was a welcome sight. I was happy to have a familiar face amidst the stress and confusion. The

cheery astronaut was appointed Terran ambassador at my request, and had taken up permanent residence planetside. He never seemed to tire of interviews, or lose patience with our timid behavior.

“Thank you for coming.” I nodded to my friend, suppressing my reaction to his toothy grin. “I’ve never met any human military personnel. It’s as though Meier has been trying to keep them away from me. He calls them ‘snakes in the grass’, whatever that means.”

“Meier is a smart man,” Noah chuckled. “They’re going to try to get you to hand over your ship blueprints, and to take sides in our national disputes. By the way, I strongly advise not doing either. Neutrality is a fine policy.”

I flicked my ears. “What disputes? Don’t you all get along now?”

“Ha. We never get along, Tarva. We just get along with the Arxur less.”

“Why can’t you make peace? That whole ‘predator’s instinct for aggression’ thing?”

“I guess.”

“You’re smart. You must realize it’s not advantageous to your species to fight.”

“We know that. But we are what we are. I’m sorry if it frightens you.”

General Kam entered the reception hall, halting our conversation. The military advisor looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Two humans trailed after him, sporting uniforms with flashy colors. If memory served me right, the one in the light blue was from the US Space Force, while the red attire designated China’s Strategic Support Force.

It was tough to remember all the factions of such a disunited species. There were hundreds of governments on Earth, each with their own culture and leadership. One of the most embarrassing incidents was when I sent thanks to Austria for supplies rendered by Australia, though both nations seemed to find the mix-up humorous.

Ever since then, I’d tried to stick to speaking with Secretary-General Meier and his office. The Venlil wanted an alliance with the entire species, not to juggle rival tribes.

“Glad to see you, Governor. General Jones and General Zhao,” Kam paused, gesturing to the two respective humans. “…have prepared a simulation of the battle for us. You’ll find their strategies, er, most intriguing.”

“Intriguing?”

General Zhao shrugged. “A win is a win.”

What did that mean? Had our predators used some cheap tactics against the Arxur?

I ushered the entourage into a conference room, making sure to keep Noah between myself and them. It was all I could do not to openly stare at the human militants. They didn’t look as imposing or feral as Meier’s diplomats would have us believe. I half-expected them to be marred with battle scars, or baring their fangs at everyone they passed.

Kam fiddled with the holo-projector, syncing the Terran devices with ours. A shimmering recreation blinked up over the central table, and I studied it with nervous anticipation. This would be our first insight into how human warfare truly worked.

“There we go,” General Jones said. “I feel obligated to note those ships are American designs.”

Zhao rolled his predator eyes, a display that looked most unnatural. “You had to slip that in, didn’t you? They used our weapons modifications. The most important part of any system is the firepower. Wouldn’t you agree, Tarva?”

“Uh, well, uh…would you mind if we watch the simulation, before I offer my opinion?” I answered in a sheepish voice. “I wouldn’t want to speak in ignorance.”

Noah smirked, shooting me a knowing glance. The ambassador’s warning proved at least half-correct, but I thought I’d done a decent job deflecting the question. Motion activated on the projector, and the visual representation sprung to life. Computer data and analysis augmented the view of the battlefield.

Six Arxur bombers barreled down on the outpost, opposed by a wall of human ships. The Terran fleet was comprised of tiny one-seater ships, whose only asset appeared to be speed. The humans outnumbered the reptiles by an order of twenty-to-one, according to the computer. Sheer numbers didn’t matter when their primitive

weapons were ineffectual against the grays.

The UN had to have something else up their sleeves, if the station survived, I thought.

Our allies swarmed the Arxur with blinding mobility. Plasma and kinetics rained on the grays' position, and the enemy struggled to lock down the pesky targets. They began shooting in all directions, as that was the surefire way to connect with something. Terran indicators blinked out by the dozens, which earned a wince from me.

Undeterred, the humans pressed on toward their deaths. The Arxur craft had sustained minor damage, but were mostly unscathed. There was no sign of any backup or reinforcements; no grand trick or ambush. I expected more complex tactics from an intelligent predator.

The humans flew practically on top of the Arxur, making it impossible for them to use their railguns. The reptiles switched over to kinetic weapons, and carved swaths through the Terran ranks with precision. The bombers then broke off toward the station, disregarding the puny fighters. The humans were not worthy of attention.

Even to me, these UN ships are a joke. This is the species that was supposed to save us? I mused. *They sent their pilots to a slaughter. Blind aggression isn't enough.*

It was the second the Arxur lost interest that the primates pounced. There were only 52 friendly vessels remaining, but they acted in harmony. The humans discharged heat-seeking missiles, so close that they were caught up in the explosions themselves. From those ranges, the grays had no chance to activate their interceptors.

It seemed the humans had finally drawn blood. Two enemy indicators flickered out, but four weathered the storm. By comparison, 23 more UN ships had gone down to their own blasts. Losing every "fighter" wasn't going to prove a point. It was time to order a retreat, before there were no forces left.

Instead, the primates violated all laws of self-preservation. The Terrans formed a barricade in the Arxur's path, trying to intercept their fire. Their railguns chewed through the fighters with ease, and whittled their numbers down to a dozen. The humans were backed

into a corner; unlike us, they would not flee. They saw that the station was about to take fire, and rushed forward in a predatory frenzy.

The last Terran ammunition was dispensed; they were drained dry, with no options to fight on. Several captains made the spontaneous decision to hurl the last scraps of their fighters into Arxur ranks. What kind of species used their ships as missiles? How could their impulse be to sacrifice their own lives?

In the wake of the humans' earlier battering, the reptiles proved unable to withstand multiple drive explosions. The handful of remaining fighters sat defiantly, almost daring any Arxur ships to emerge from the smoke. The simulation froze, as it reached the end of the data input.

"We suffered heavy losses. If only our drone program was ready for deployment. That would be a game changer. At least we know now, the Arxur can be taken down," General Jones said.

"There were no Venlil casualties. We destroyed the grays before they reached the station," General Zhao concluded.

I glanced away in horror. Only three UN vessels remained from the original allotment. The humans sacrificed ships numbering in the three digits to stop the Arxur. That could hardly be considered a victory.

How could predators develop vessels that were that much weaker than their counterparts? That loss ratio was unacceptable in a long-term war.

"There is a small point of concern, Governor." Jones paused, waiting for me to focus on her. "A Venlil patrol ship went missing in Federation territory, with a human on board. In the hours since, the Gojids have started to mobilize along the border."

"We believe the ship may have been captured, which would mean the Feds are now aware of us," Zhao added. "The only positive is that unless the hostages told them, they don't know where Earth is. That buys us some time to figure out our next action."

My blood ran cold as ice. The Federation possessed the exact location of Earth. While the humans were advised that they might be killed on sight, I hadn't disclosed the specifics of our history. There was no telling how a predatory species might retaliate to a

plot for their extinction.

That said, I couldn't bear to see them blindsided by a pre-emptive strike. The time had come where I had to divulge the full extent of the Federation's hatred.

"Well, maybe we should speak to them," Noah chimed in. "I'm not sure we shouldn't have from the start. The Arxur are a sample size of one. The aliens have no experience with humans, or any other predators. If Tarva vouches for us, they might come around."

I stood up from my chair. "I doubt that. They'll hate you."

The Terran ambassador frowned. "If you can accept us, why can't they? How do you know that the Federation will try to kill us, just because we're predators?

"I just do."

Noah crossed his arms. "You're going to have to do better than that."

"I…I need a word with the Ambassador. Alone."

"No, I think we all should hear this." General Zhao's posture was stiff as a board, as though he'd sensed something off. "Whatever pertains to our safety concerns everyone in this room."

"Well, it's because…"

Noah tilted his head inquisitively. Worry sparkled in his brown eyes, as he noticed me shying away from him. I wondered if even he could forgive me for such a grave omission, for the betrayal of his trust.

"Because they tried to kill the last predators they found." I slumped my shoulders in defeat, avoiding his gaze. "I didn't want to tell you."

"You're saying they killed another predator species before?" the ambassador asked.

"No. There are only two."

"Then…"

"The Federation knew about humans and Earth a long time ago. The vote to glass your planet was unanimous, after footage of your world wars became public."

General Jones' eyes narrowed to slits. "Unanimous. That includes

the Venlil?"

"Yes. Before my time but…yes. They…we were meticulous in our planning. We believed we couldn't fail."

"Wow." Hurt flashed in Noah's gaze, though the human quickly blinked it away. "Alright. Um, what stopped them?"

"The Federation thought you were dead. Something about hundreds of nuclear explosions, right after those world wars ended. I myself wonder what that was."

"Testing. There were countless nuclear tests in that era, in unpopulated areas, might I add," Noah muttered.

"I see. At any rate, that's how we knew exactly what you were, and where you were from. Before your ship ever hailed us. The Federation will recognize what the captive is, and find Earth's location on a star chart."

Jones' eyes were icy. "You didn't think this was something we needed to know, Tarva?"

"Yeah. Why are you telling us now?" Zhao spat.

I shrank back under the predators' withering gaze. While their anger was justified, it rendered me unable to form a response. Open hostility was not something my instincts processed well; not when they were eyeing me up like their next meal.

"The Governor didn't want us to have cause to attack the Federation," Noah said, leaping to my defense. "They are her friends, no matter how unjust they are. Besides, she's only known us for a month."

Kam cleared his throat. "It's little consolation, but the Federation means well. Truly."

"Well-meaning or not, they want to kill us. We have to make difficult choices," Jones growled. "Earth must be protected at all costs. I don't think Tarva wants to see that side of us."

"I will s-support you all, no matter what you choose," I stammered. "I don't want humanity to die. If you evacuate people from Earth, they will be welcome in our territory. And though I have no right to ask, I beg you to show the Federation mercy."

The human generals did not respond aloud, but their expressions conveyed a simmering rage. As Noah once told me, the concept of

karma was close to their hearts. I suspected any Terran mercy was dependent on the Federation's next actions.

The galaxy's prejudice could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter 11

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: August 30, 2136

The glow of artificial lighting was the first thing that met my eyes. I stared at the unfamiliar surroundings in confusion, trying to recall where I was.

This doesn't seem right. How did I get here?

Someone had cocooned me in a blanket, which insulated me from the drafty room. There was light pressure by my ears, perhaps from some sort of bandage. Pain pulsed in my temple, dulled by a painkiller. Snippets of shapes lingered in my memory, but there was nothing concrete. I think I had been drifting in and out of consciousness for days.

My brain concluded that this was a hospital, which meant I was recovering from a serious injury. My addled state suggested the damage was concentrated on the head.

Gritting my teeth, I tried to think of the last thing I could remember. Two Arxur bombers were chasing my spacecraft, and after that, everything got fuzzy. How was I still alive? It had seemed to be a hopeless scenario. There was a grim certainty that they would catch a small ship, sooner or later.

There were vague recollections of being paralyzed in fear, plastered against the seat. The person flying was screaming my name, and had the most visceral look on their predator…

I snapped upright. *Marcel! Where is Marcel? What happened to him?*

"Easy. Calm down." A gentle voice came from my right. A Takkan male was seated beside my bed, keeping an eye on my vitals. "You're safe now. I'm Doctor Zarn. You're in the medical bay of a Federation warship."

"The Federation?" My heart rate spiked, which Zarn seemed to notice. "Why are you involved?"

"Well…your craft came into our territory, so we took out the Arxur. It was fortunate that the grays crippled your ship first. If they didn't, our boarding party wouldn't—"

“Where is Marcel?” I blurted.

The rush of panic was best described as gasoline lacing through my insides. It was not safe for him to encounter unprepared aliens alone, when his appearance was so jarring. My mind leapt to the worst-case scenario. Had the Federation killed the human on sight? All I could picture was myself, standing over his corpse.

The doctor patted my arm. “He’s not here. Rest easy, he’s not a threat.”

“He’s alive,” I exhaled. “Please, take me to him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I need to see him. I won’t be able to function if I don’t.”

I staggered to my feet, but wobbled when I tried to walk. Zarn caught me with a grunt, setting me back on the bed. Sympathy flashed in his amber eyes, as if he sensed my desperation. The doctor retrieved a wheelchair from the storage closet, and eased me into it.

“Captain Sovlin is going to kill me, but if that’s really what you need to heal…then alright,” Zarn grumbled.

The Takkan doctor pushed me into a hallway, steering us past maintenance rooms and lounges. My concern intensified as I received pitying stares from the crewmates we passed. It reminded me of the look people had when they learned a species’ homeworld had been destroyed by the Arxur. Had the Federation assumed that humans attacked Venlil Prime?

Oh God, how long have I been out? They would at least hear Marcel out, right? They’re rational people, I tried to convince myself. *I need to back up his story, before something terrible happens. I have to speak to their captain at once.*

A pair of automatic doors creaked open, and Zarn rolled me into an observation room. A throng of officers stood by a glass pane, which provided a view to the holding cell. They seemed to be pointing to a spot in the corner. From their whispers, I caught the words “non-responsive” and “hungry.”

My blood turned to ice as I realized what the tan mass in the nook was. Marcel was curled up in a ball, hugging his knees to his chest. The human was shaking from head-to-toe, and looked gaunt enough

to hardly be recognizable. His coverings had been removed, leaving his form exposed and barren. His face was buried in the wall, so I could only see the purple bruises lining his spine.

A desperate scream poured from my mouth, high-pitched and agonized. I flung myself toward the window, crawling on all fours. The sounds of the doctor trying to pacify me and the bewildered shouts of the captain registered, but I drowned them out.

“MARCEL!” I shrieked.

Pain laced through my vocal cords from the volume, but I hardly felt it. The human lifted his head, craning his neck toward the glass. The moment his face became visible, I gasped in horror.

Clawmarks traced down his right cheek, deep gashes. Marcel hadn’t even bothered to clean off the dried blood, perhaps losing the ability to care. The sockets around his hazel eyes were puffy and bruised; the left one was severe enough to be swollen shut. To add insult to injury, a thick metal band was clasped around his neck, restricting his airway.

The human rose on weak legs, but stumbled to the glass. His gaze locked on me, and his lips curved up slightly. The band on his neck crackled with electricity seconds later. With a yelp, the predator collapsed in a heap. One of the officers must have triggered the shock, as a form of punitive control. My heart twisted, watching my friend racked with pain.

I snarled toward the Federation posse. “Stop that!”

The one I believed was Captain Sovlin blinked in confusion. “It’s snarling at you.”

“That’s how humans show happiness. They don’t have tails or moveable ears,” I growled.

The electric current ceased, to my relief. Marcel languished on the floor, clutching his throat. The skin beneath the collar looked red, as though the human had been zapped repeatedly. I was amazed that he found the strength to answer my call the first time.

“Marcel,” I repeated.

The predator struggled to a kneeling position, and pressed a splayed hand against the glass. The Federation officers backed away, like they thought he could reach through a solid object. Tears welled in

my eyes; the poor guy was struggling with such simple motions. I met his gaze, and placed my own paw opposite his palm.

“Slanek,” Marcel croaked. “I am h-happy…you’re okay. I was worried.”

I pinned my ears against my head with concern. The human’s voice sounded weak and feeble. I could only imagine how much he was hurting, looking at the wounds all over his body. By my estimation, they weren’t feeding him either; the Federation was letting him endure a slow death by starvation.

I sniffled, wiping a tear off my face. “I am so sorry, Marc. It was my job to protect you, and I failed. I left you all alone.”

“Don’t cry. P-please. It’s not your fault,” the human murmured.

Doctor Zarn seemed floored by our exchange, as though he didn’t understand what was happening. A paw grasped at my scruff and dragged me away from the glass. I reared on my assailant, flexing my claws as best as I could. There was no chance I was letting anyone take me away from the human.

“What is wrong with you, Slanek?” Captain Sovlin set me down in the hallway, deflecting an attempted swing. “You’re crying over a vicious, sadistic predator. A human!”

“What is wrong with *me?*” The veins in my eyes bulged, as white-hot fury coursed through my blood. “How could you do this to him? Marcel is my friend.”

“I thought you’d be more grateful, being liberated. A species that enslaves and exploits you are not your friends. I can’t believe I have to say that.”

“We aren’t enslaved. We’re partners with them, willingly.”

Sovlin recoiled. “I’m sorry, what?!”

“A science vessel made contact with us. After speaking with them, we couldn’t let you chase their trail. We knew this is what you fuckers would do, to an innocent species that came in peace.”

“I…I refuse to believe that. The distress signal…their history…well, just look at them!” he spat, spines bristling. “The Venlil wouldn’t betray the Federation. Not for their kind. Do you have any idea which species you’re dealing with?”

“We do. Venlil scientists did tests that prove that humans feel

empathy. They are kind and gentle. *Marcel* is kind and gentle."

"Kind and gentle? As if. I can think of a quick way to sober you up." The captain's voice was low with anger. "Marcel hasn't eaten in days. Let's see how gentle he really is!"

Sovlin grabbed me by the scruff again, and marched back into the observation room. He opened the door to the holding cell, flinging me inside with disdain. Zarn shouted at him to stop, once it was obvious what the intention was. The doctor tried to remind him that I had a head injury, not to mention being under the influence of painkillers. The rough officer ignored him, and clicked the door shut behind me.

A brief tinge of fear crossed my mind. I knew Marcel didn't want to eat me, but this might be pushing his instincts. When his options were starving to death or gnawing at my bones, there had to be some temptation.

The human glanced at me, surprised at my involuntary entrance. Russet hair sprouted along his jawline, which gave him a rougher look than I was used to. He approached cautiously, and watched me with sad eyes. Seeing that I didn't back away, he settled down beside me. This was the closest we'd ever been, which made the discoloration around his left eye all the more noticeable.

"What happened to your eye?" I managed.

"S-sovlin was tired of looking at me. Said next time, he'd do it with claws out, and then…" The human gestured to the gash on his cheek. "It's everything I do, Slanek. They hate my existence."

I reached out with a shaking paw, tracing the wound. "Does it hurt?"

Keep going with the stupid questions, Slanek. Bravo. You're really making him feel better.

Marcel nodded. "Everywhere."

The fissure inside my chest widened; the way his voice cracked with that word was heartbreaking. The human lowered his head into his hands, and defeat radiated through his posture. I couldn't bear to see the sharp, considerate Marcel reduced to this.

"I'm going to get you out of here. I promise," I whimpered.

"My friend…don't make promises…you can't keep…" the human

coughed.

My paws tugged the predator closer to me, before I realized I had done it. Marcel's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he didn't try to pull away. He rested his head on my stomach, and tried to absorb some of my body warmth. I petted his hair with a tentative paw, humming soothingly. His oily mane was softer than I expected it to be, except for the strands that were crusted by dried blood.

The human closed his hunter eyes, relaxing into my arms. A more peaceful expression settled onto his face, and I observed him with fondness. Sovlin was right; I saw exactly how gentle Marcel was. With his bruised skull cradled in my lap and his shivering body snuggled up against me, he seemed so frail and innocent.

"But I will get you out of here. Because you are my brother. My best friend," I whispered. "And I love you."

I thought Marcel didn't hear me, because there was no reaction or response. It wasn't until I saw a tear trickle down his cheek that I realized he had. The human reached up with a feeble hand, and brought my paw over his chest. The steady beat of his heart ebbed into my toes, warm and rhythmic.

At the glass pane, the Federation officers gawked at the affectionate scene between a predator and its prey.

Chapter 12

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: August 31, 2136

I don't remember drifting off, but it was incredible that my instincts allowed it. There was no greater state of helplessness than during slumber, between diminished awareness and an inability to react to threats. I wonder if Marcel understood how deep of a display of trust it was, that I could fall asleep in his presence at all.

The human had stirred by the time I awoke, and was crouched in the corner watching me. I swished my tail at the predator, and he smiled in return. It was a sinister display, yet bearable to me because of its intention. As terrible as his physical condition was, the teeth-flashing meant he was in better spirits, and that was all that mattered.

"That head wound must be bad, if you're willing to go near me now." The humorous lilt had returned to Marcel's voice, though it sounded strained. "How are you feeling?"

I pawed at the bandage. "Better. I think I can walk again."

"Oh dear," the human sighed. "I didn't realize you couldn't move. So that's why you didn't run away…and I guess I heard what I needed to hear yesterday. I've been delirious. I'm sorry."

"No. You didn't mishear a word, and I meant what I said. We're in this together."

The sound of his stomach rumbling overshadowed our conversation moments later. The gurgling persisted for several seconds, loud and insistent. Marcel's expression morphed to embarrassment, and the hint of an apology danced in his eyes. I think he figured it'd make me uncomfortable, but it only jogged my worry for his health. No animal could survive without sustenance.

"Have they fed you at all?" I asked.

The human shook his head. "No."

"What about water? I'm thirsty myself."

Marcel pointed to a rusty bucket in the corner, which was about half-full with grayish liquid. The thought of lapping from that filthy

container like a wild beast made me nauseous. If more time passed though, there wouldn't be much choice. I didn't want to take the only resource the human had, for now.

"Alright. We've got to get out of here," I said. "You think, and I'll think. We'll come up with something."

I glanced toward the glass pane, trying to figure out how to persuade the Federation officers. The captain was absent, which was a small point of relief. The ship doctor appeared to be in a heated discussion with a Kolshian male. Maybe our companionship had given them second thoughts about humans? I swiveled my ears toward them, straining to pick up their words.

Doctor Zarn raised his eye-ridges in disgust. "…more trauma. We should've never thrown him in there, Recel."

"I know," a silky voice answered. "Captain told me I could spring Slanek once the predator tries something. He just wants to scare some sense into him. Sovlin wouldn't let it eat a pup, you know."

"But what if it pounces on him faster than we can activate the shock collar? I can't undo a broken neck," Zarn argued. "Slanek needs medical attention, regardless, and I'm not going in there."

"And what do I tell the captain?"

"Make up a story. Slanek is awake now, and the human is separated from him. This could be our only chance. We can get him to move slowly toward the exit, and fry the predator if it tries anything."

I glowered at the observation panel. "Fuck you! I'm not going anywhere without Marcel."

The human squinted in confusion. With his lousy ears, there was no way he could hear their hushed words. The two Federation officers shared a glance, before fixing me with patronizing looks.

"Slanek, you're not thinking straight," Recel hissed. "If what you say is true, the Venlil have fallen for a dreadful ruse. These humans just want you to give up our secrets. They'll discard you as soon as they've drained you dry. They are not your friends."

"That's rich, coming from the crew that tossed me in a cage, intending for me to be attacked by a predator."

Recel sighed. "That was Sovlin's doing. He didn't consult us."

"Listen to me, Slanek. That thing is twisting your compassion

against you," Zarn pleaded. "The Arxur allowed us to uplift them, and only then did they attack. I'm sure your, um, *Marcel* mimics very well, but it's not real. These humans are just playing along to their benefit."

"You don't think any Venlil considered that? The tests we did literally analyzed human brain activity."

Recel blinked in confusion. "What tests?"

"Sovlin didn't tell you?" I gasped. "Our experiments recorded how humans respond to violence, and guess what? Their brains lit up with pain. You can't fake empathy on a biochemical level."

The two aliens were quiet, as the weight of my revelation sunk in. I recalled my own skepticism when I first learned of the humans' benevolence. There would always be a little voice in my head, suggesting that they wanted to hunt me. Our entire evolution hinged on avoiding predators; recognizing them as threats on sight. It wasn't something we could unlearn.

"You're either misinterpreting the results, or the humans altered them." The doctor waved a paw dismissively, and eyed Marcel with undisguised loathing. "I can't listen to this, Slanek. Not from one of our own. Perhaps by the time I get back, the first officer will have snapped some sense into you."

As his counterpart stormed out in a rage, Recel inspected the human's behavior with curious eyes. The grizzled veteran seemed to be the only one listening to a word I said. My disclosure seemed to affect him, since he began pacing back and forth. It violated every facet of our moral code, to treat a feeling person with such cruelty. Now was my best chance to persuade him into making Marcel's situation more livable.

"Marcel needs to eat," I said, trying to keep my tone calm. "He will starve if he doesn't."

"Why should I care?" the officer growled.

"I have no idea how long humans can live without food, but it's not forever. What use is he to you dead? Also, it's torture to me to watch him starve. If you won't do it for his sake, do it for mine."

Recel waved a grasper in frustration. "Do you really expect me to carve up an animal, and serve its flesh on a platter? Or are you saying you'd be the one to slaughter it for this… predator?"

“Humans can eat plants. In fact, Marcel only consumes vegetation. Please, if you have any decency, I beg you. Give us something. Anything.”

There was a hint of pity in his gaze, as he scanned Marcel’s visible ribs. I could tell he didn’t like seeing any creature suffer, no matter what it was. Recel fished the half-eaten remains of a purple fruit out of the waste bin, wrinkling his nose.

“I…I’m going to put this right at the door. If it so much as takes a step toward me,” the second-in-command waved the collar’s trigger. “This is all I can manage. Sovlin will notice if I take seconds from the rations.”

The door slid open with a loud creak. Recel tossed the fruit inside like it burned to the touch. I scooped it off the floor, trying to push down my revulsion at the bitemarks on its side. In his current state, I think Marcel would eat it even if it was covered in literal shit.

The human snatched the fruit from my paw without a second thought. He tore into it, wolfing it down in ravenous gulps; it was all he could do not to swallow it whole. He slumped back against the wall, quivering, and then proceeded to suck the juice off his grimy fingers.

It wasn’t anywhere close to enough to satiate the human’s appetite, or to provide adequate nutrition. But Recel was the only one to offer him so much as a morsel, so I wasn’t going to complain. Hopefully, it was enough to take the edge off of Marcel’s hunger; to ease a bit of the desperation.

“Thank you so much,” I told the first officer. “It means the world to me.”

“Yes,” Marcel rumbled. “Thank you, Recel. I am appreciative.”

Recel met the predator’s eyes, shuddering from behind the safety of the glass. My guess was that the captain gave orders not to let the human speak. However, I suspected the first officer was curious to see what the prisoner would say, and just how lucid one of his kind could be. A cuddly, furless fruit-eater didn’t seem at all like the bloodthirsty predators the Federation said they were.

“Why would you want to fight the Arxur, human?” the officer asked suddenly. “Is it to claim the galaxy as your own catch? To rid yourself of the competition?”

“The grays kill children. They eat sentients. Is that not enough reason to fight them?” Marcel rubbed the chafed skin under his collar, wincing. “Humans are lonely. We wanted to be your friends, but you all think we’re monsters.”

Recel sighed. “And what do you do to your…friends?”

“We protect them. We stand by them unconditionally. Just as we are loyal to the Venlil now.”

“How can you prove that you aren’t using them as your playthings? You’re telling me your instincts aren’t tempted at all, having a vulnerable creature like Slanek, at your mercy?”

“God no. Humans dote on animals much less cute than him, you know. Look at that adorable face! All I can think about is his safety.”

“Prove it to—”

Captain Sovlin burst into the observation room, staring daggers at his first officer. The root of his exasperation must be walking in on his subordinate, conversing with the predator.

Zarn was tailing close behind, no doubt having informed the boss about my troubling statements. The doctor had a smug look on his face.

“You’re under its spell too?” the brutish Gojid spat. “Clearly, it’s dangerous to let it start talking, if it can entrance you so easily. Anyone alone might succumb to its charm.”

The captain leaned toward Recel, and the Kolshian flinched away from his threatening scowl. Sovlin nabbed the collar’s trigger out of the officer’s tentacle. He looked at me, noting how I backed toward Marcel, and shook his head. His spines stood on edge, fully extended. It made him appear much larger than his true size.

“Get Slanek out of here, Doctor,” the leader spat. “I’ll sign off on the psychological treatments you recommended, and we’ll cure him of this delusion.”

“No!! You can’t take me away,” I snarled.

Sovlin sidled up to the cell door, and waved for me to come to him. The idea of being placed under Federation “treatments” terrified me. What if they convinced me that Marcel was evil, or erased my memories of him? A pitiful whine vibrated in my throat, and I

skittered away with my tail between my legs.

The human moved forward to protect me, placing his bony form between me and the captain. How could he be worrying about me still, after all he'd been through?

"I mean it. I won't come with you. Not willingly!" My voice shook with fear, but I managed to squeak out the words. "Why would I ever want to come with a monster like you?"

"Would you rather watch us dissect your human?" A crazed light flashed into Sovlin's eyes. It was the look of a man who was at the end of his rope. "I think it's time we open it up. See what makes it tick."

Terror radiated through my blood at the captain's chilling threat. Marcel faltered in his protective stance, as he processed what was said too. The Gojid looked him right in the eyes, then jabbed a slender claw on the collar remote. The predator was down in an instant, too weakened to maintain his footing.

Sovlin advanced on his prisoner, and I tried to get in the way. He merely shoved me to the floor with a disgusted grunt.

Zarn took that as his cue to rush inside the cell, and scoop me up in his sturdy arms. Panic filled my psyche, as though it were my own life in the balance. My self-preservation instincts kicked into overdrive, filling me with a burning urge to escape. I tried to writhe out of the doctor's grasp, to no avail.

My friend's eyes narrowed as he noticed I was gone. He struggled against the pain, propping himself onto his elbows. Sovlin's face contorted with hatred, and he dealt a kick to the convulsing Marcel's head. There was a sickening crack, which I recognized as the sound of bone breaking. Blood gushed from his misshapen nose like a fountain, and the human howled in agony. It was a primal cry that made my heart burn in my chest.

The captain was unrelenting in the shock's administration, electrocuting the predator nonstop. The human's complexion was turning bright red, and he struggled to breathe. His veins bulged against his pallid skin, and his teeth chattered in his jaw. He rolled onto his back, unable to muster any more fight.

The Gojid lowered a hindleg, right on the spot on Marcel's ribs with the most bruising. The predator's scream seemed to satisfy the

captain.

“It’s time to end this.” Sovlin drew his sidearm and flicked off the safety. “I should’ve done this at the start, instead of wasting our oxygen prolonging its *wretched* life.”

Recel gaped in horror, inching out from the observation room. “Sir, we need to keep it alive. At least until we know more.”

“There’s nothing more I need to know. I want it off my ship!” the captain roared.

The first officer closed his eyes, but didn’t act to intervene. The voltage ceased as the Gojid turned his attention to his weapon. Sovlin towered over Marcel, pressing the barrel to the human’s temple. Those hazel eyes I had come to adore stared up helplessly, glassed over from pain.

There was nothing I could do as my predator friend faced his execution.

Chapter 13

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: August 31, 2136

The thought of a world without my human was too much to bear. After all we'd been through, he felt like a long-lost brother rather than an alien predator. I would never hear his voice, message him in a chatroom, or fly a spaceship with him again. His life was about to end in a haze of misery, because I was too weak to stop it.

Why had I promised Marcel I would free him from this hell? It was cruel to give him a false sense of hope.

If I had said the right words…if I had woken up sooner, maybe this wouldn't have happened. What kind of friend am I? A failure.

I thought I had more time to talk the Federation down, since they refrained from killing him this far. There was no reason for the captain to rush to an irreversible decision…though he didn't seem in a particular hurry now.

Sovlin was savoring the anguish on Marcel's face, and seemed to be daring him to fight back. He tapped the gun against the predator's crooked nose, which elicited a cracking sound. He swiftly returned the barrel to the human's temple, and flashed his teeth. The lack of a reaction disappointed him; Marcel was too out of it to process any more sensation.

The captain sighed, and resolved himself to finish the job. I wanted to make some sort of last-ditch effort, but Zarn had me ensnared in his suffocating grip. The doctor chuckled as he realized the human was about to be terminated. It was that callous glee that spurred me to action.

"NO!" I screamed. "Leave…him…alone!"

I bit Zarn's arm with force, then thrashed about with my tiny claws. The weighty Takkan restrained me with ease, dragging me further out of the cell. My teeth hadn't even pierced his thick hide; the efforts wore down my strength more than anything else. The doctor clamped a paw around my mouth, suppressing any other attempts to call out.

I reached out for Marcel desperately. The human made eye contact

with me, and tears rolled down his mangled face. Despite the overwhelming pain, he tried to put on a brave smile. The predator was thinking about my feelings, even in his final moments.

Sovlin's claw drifted toward the trigger, and I averted my eyes. I didn't want to see Marcel's brains come out the other side of his head. His beautiful snarl should be the last thing in my memory. That was how I wanted to remember him.

"Lower your weapon, Sovlin, or I'll put you down with that thing." Recel's quavering voice broke the silence, rather than a gunshot. "I can't watch this anymore. You are behaving just like the Arxur."

My eyes blinked open to find the first officer, pointing his sidearm at the captain. Several emotions rushed across Sovlin's face. Most seemed to be a shade of outrage or shock. The Gojid was relishing his assault of the predator, and didn't appreciate having the finale cut off.

"Recel, there is no intelligence we need from it. Slanek can tell us everything." Zarn tightened his hold around me, imploring the first officer to stand down. "Its life has no value. It is nothing but a danger to the crew, in the case that it gets loose."

"It is sapient. That must have some value. No matter how little. Why have you both forgotten that?"

The captain's lips curled back, revealing his curved molars. "Because *they* took everything from me. Everything! And now, this monster has the nerve to corrupt *my* crew. Let me tell you, it is done taking from us. This ends now!"

"But it has done nothing wrong. Look at it; it's helpless," Recel hissed. "You've beaten it half to death."

"So you think this human is *sweet* too?" Sovlin sneered. "It thirsts for blood just like the Arxur do. It is a violent creature at its core, its rotten core. Marcel savors the hunt. If it was honest, it would admit it!"

The only time Marcel ever showed any violent impulses, was after he watched the Arxur torture Venlil children, I thought. *The captain isn't wrong about human bloodlust, but they have reasons to kill. It's not anger borne from a place of cruelty.*

The first officer swallowed nervously. "Are aggression and compassion mutually exclusive? We don't know. There could be

more to the story. If there's a chance it wanted peace and we kill it, what does that make us?"

"It makes us heroes. I think you're a damned fool, if you give it the chance to do the exact same thing the Arxur did. Now you're going to let me protect us, and we're going to put this incident behind us."

"How can you be sure you're right?"

"The Federation wouldn't have voted to destroy Earth the first time if they weren't sure, Recel. I trust in the judgment of several hundred species, as should you."

"Earth?" Marcel groaned. "I never t-told you…"

The captain's paw twitched around his gun. A shot rang out moments later, and my fur stood on end. Blood spurted through a wound in Sovlin's thigh, and the crippled leg buckled beneath him. It wasn't the Gojid who got off the first shot, to my exuberant relief.

Recel tackled the spiky male away from the human. The first officer disarmed his superior, and cast a blank stare at the prisoner. The proximity to Marcel seemed to bother him, though he tried to keep his wits. I was amazed that the Kolshian veteran had intervened. The talk of human neural activity must have instilled some qualms in his mind.

The first officer aimed his gun toward the doctor. If he turned to the tertiary threat, he must be satisfied that Sovlin was restrained and Marcel was incapable of lunging at him. I yelped as I felt a sudden tug around my waist. Zarn was propping me up as a shield, and trying to load a syringe.

"Let the Venlil go, Zarn," Recel spat. "You don't want to hurt him."

"I don't want to hurt Slanek. But I need to fix him! He's ill."

"Release him, now."

The doctor pressed a needle to my throat, ignoring my whimper. "Or what?"

"Or I remove the human's collar and we find out."

The predator was in no condition to move; it was obvious to me that he was on the brink of losing consciousness. I think Recel knew the threat was empty, but it worked like a charm on the doctor. Zarn's grip slackened, and I slithered out of his arms in a flash. My sprint to Marcel's side was a blur of elated bliss.

The human yelped as I dove atop his chest, forgetting about the inflamed bruises. He pushed me off of him, with care not to hurt me. Gritting his teeth, he tried to sit up, but didn't get farther than raising his head. My stomach flipped at the sight of his nose, twisted to the side, with the skin turning a deep purple already.

"Did you tell them?" Marcel croaked.

I tilted my head. "Tell them what?"

"About…Earth. T-they…they're…going to…"

"No. It's a long story, but we've got to warn your people."

While my eyes were averted, Recel placed a makeshift gag around Sovlin's mouth. The captain was squirming, his voice muffled to grunts. The first officer had resorted to pacing back and forth, palming his head in frustration. I assumed he was at a loss for what to do with Marcel.

Intervening to spare the human's life was simpler than releasing him. At the end of the day, Recel was a frightened Kolshian with a gun. He was the primary obstacle in our path to getting Marcel home. I contemplated an angle of persuasion, since my odds of fighting him unarmed seemed paltry.

If the human dies, why did he shoot his own captain? I thought. *Surely he realizes he's too far in to back out now.He wouldn't want his treason to be for naught.*

"Recel, we've got to get Marcel out of here. He needs a doctor," I pleaded.

"I know. And Zarn would poison the thing as soon as treat it," Recel sighed. "If there's billions of these predators out there, I suppose letting this one go isn't going to make a difference. Even if…ugh, never mind."

I better not give him time to change his mind. He really sounds like he's having second thoughts.

I flicked my ears toward Marcel. "How are we going to move him?"

The first officer surveyed the vicinity. His eyes landed on the wheelchair Zarn used for me yesterday. I sensed his hesitancy to retrieve it from the observation room, with Sovlin still grumbling curses and Marcel trying to sit up. The Kolshian tapped me on the shoulder, and pressed the gun into my paws.

“If Sovlin or the predator try anything, shoot them,” Recel growled. “I’ll be gone a few seconds.”

The officer sprinted over to the wheelchair’s resting spot like a predator was chasing him…which I guess he felt like it was. He rolled it back to our location, and almost fell over when Marcel glanced at him.

I considered pointing the gun at Recel, since I didn’t trust him to treat the human like a person. The Kolshian was a bystander to Sovlin’s torture, after all. Even now, he kept referring to Marcel as “it” or “the predator.”

The sole reason I decided against backstabbing him was that I needed help. Recel had saved Marcel’s life, and wasn’t actively trying to hurt him. I didn’t know my way around the ship, so getting out of here was impossible without him. Not to mention that the veteran was stronger, well-adapted to stress, and more adept at combat.

The first officer seemed oblivious to my deliberation, as he stepped away from the wheelchair. He reclaimed his firearm, brandishing it with shaking graspers. I was by far the least threatening entity in the room, to his brain.

“Move the human into the chair, Slanek,” Recel grumbled.

“I can’t. I’m too weak. You have to do it.”

“I don’t want to touch it!”

“Grow up. He won’t bite.”

Recel huffed, but slowly knelt by Marcel. He reached out with a grasper, and hissed in disgust as it touched sweat-soaked skin. His breathing devolved to sporadic gasps, as the fear chemicals became unbearable. When he lifted the predator, I worried his grip might falter. The human shouldn’t be dropped, especially in his current condition.

With eyes the size of moons, Recel deposited my friend into the chair. Marcel yelped from the rough landing. My lip curled up without thinking, an instinctive warning not to hurt the predator.

“Don’t give me that look, Slanek! I’m trying my best,” the first officer spat. “I don’t see *you* doing anything helpful.”

“I want to help. I’d do anything, really—”

“Gah, I’m sorry. That was harsh. I apologize.” Recel took a deep breath, and positioned himself behind the predator. “This is overwhelming for me, okay? Shit…let’s just get moving.”

Marcel was wheeled out of the cell by the trembling Kolshian, past the watching Zarn. I made eye contact with the doctor during my own exit. A Federation officer, carting a wounded predator away, with a mesmerized Venlil in tow; suffice to say, it wasn’t his desired outcome. The Takkan seemed to be having an aneurysm at the sight of our posse.

“You’re making a big mistake. Humans are sociopaths. Murderers!” Zarn screeched.

Recel pointed at the doctor. “You get in that cell and treat Sovlin. I’d prefer if he doesn’t bleed out.”

The medic bared his teeth at us. He slunk inside with reluctance, and began tending to the captain’s injury with his kit.

Recel pressed a button outside the cell, and the door slid shut. Several clicks indicated that it locked behind us. Clearly, the first officer didn’t want his devious shipmates pursuing us, or tipping us off to the crew. Realization flashed in the doctor’s eyes, and he slammed a paw on the wall in frustration.

“Why didn’t I do that to you all?” Zarn wailed.

Recel snorted, waving a shiny object. “Because I have the key.”

The hint of a smirk played at Marcel’s face, which showed he was still conscious. I was pleased to see him responsive, though I hoped he didn’t start laughing. The last thing we needed was the first officer thinking the human was growling. It was going to be difficult to get a battered predator out unnoticed as things were.

“Recel…aren’t the crew going to wonder why the predator got loose?” I asked. “Won’t they freak out?”

The first officer thought for a moment. He yanked the fire alarm, then pressed a button on his holopad to trigger an evacuation order. An automated message relayed the command to abandon ship, while the overhead sprinklers doused us in cold water.

This guy is smart, I’ll give him that. I thought. *Maybe he will be useful.*

Nobody would question an officer moving a high-value prisoner under emergency procedures. In his current state, Marcel appeared

sedated, so that might limit panic too.

Giddiness abounded in my mind at the thought of freedom. Returning home with my best friend might have been a trip to paradise, as far as I was concerned. It felt like we had been given a new lease on life.

With uncertain steps, Recel guided us into the shuttle bay. Several ear-piercing screams were our greeting, once the crewmates detected the half-conscious predator. The way they pointed at Marcel made me seethe. The people nearest to the entrance tripped over themselves in their haste to get away.

The first officer ignored them, pushing Marcel toward an unoccupied shuttle. He carried the human with less overt fright this time. His delicacy as he placed the predator in the back seat surprised me. The fact that he noticed his prior mistake, through the haze of terror, showed a great deal of empathy.

Recel clicked the harness over Marcel's withered chest, which was forcing out shallow breaths. The Kolshian felt the human's pulse; the concern in his eyes reignited my own worries. The heartbeat must have been rapid or erratic.

The first officer found a blanket under the seat, and draped it over the predator's barren form. It was undeniably a kind gesture. Recel seemed to care; whether he would admit it was another question. As reluctant as I was to forgive the officer for his role in Marcel's abduction, I was worried about what would happen to him next. We couldn't leave the man who saved us behind to hang for treason.

"Come with us." I jumped into the pilot seat, firing up the launch sequence. "You can't stay here, Recel. They'll have you hanged."

"I'd rather face whatever the Federation has in store for me than live surrounded by humans." The first officer took a last look at Marcel, blinking rapidly. "But I wish you both well. For the sake of us all, I pray you're right about this."

"Please…you don't have to see the humans. I'm sure the Venlil will take care of you, and we can put you somewhere far away from them."

For Marcel's sake, we have to dock at the outpost…assuming it's still there, I thought. *I'm not sure how the humans would react to Recel's presence, but we can cross that bridge when we get to it.*

“But that’s not the point. I deserve to hang, Slanek!” The officer’s composure crumbled, and he buried his face in his tentacles. “I don’t know what came over me back there. I’m a traitor.”

“You stopped a murder. And now, this is our only chance to stop a genocide. If Earth is attacked, there will be no chance of peace. Not now, maybe not ever. The fate of the Federation hinges on what we do. Are you really going to sit that out?”

Recel stepped off the craft, a torn look on his face. He stood motionless and pondered my words. No wise veteran wanted another predatory enemy. That would ensure that the Federation lost the war.

With a reluctant sigh, the first officer clambered back onto the ship. He squeezed into the back seat beside Marcel, leaning away from him. Regret was already etched on the Kolshian’s gelatinous features.

I suspected this would be a long ride for our Federation savior.

Chapter 14

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 1, 2136

My visit to the research outpost was intended to last half a day. At my request, Cheln, my diplomatic advisor, had crafted a speech to show our solidarity with the UN. The whole afternoon was a joint ceremony in remembrance of the humans who sacrificed their lives in our defense.

At the end of it, I would send off the predators who partook in our first civilian encounter. The volunteers of “Doctors Without Borders” and “The Red Cross” would board the initial outbound ship, with their Venlil partners in tow. It was time for humans to receive a proper integration into our society, and that meant moving planetside.

That was a less concerning prospect than it would’ve been before our experiments. There were zero reports of human-on-Venlil violence during the past 10 days. Most of the complaints against the Terrans involved the predators trying to stroke our curly fur, which I found bewildering. That wasn’t behavior I saw them exhibit with each other, so it couldn’t be written off as a social custom. Perhaps a display of possessiveness?

But overall, the trial of our species living together was a pleasant success; more so than any scientists predicted. The predators had an uncanny ability to bond with anything, and that allowed them to forge close connections within days. My mind defaulted to thinking of Noah and Sara as part of my in-group, at this point. I never could’ve imagined, when this all started, that I would look forward to seeing them as I did now.

“So they’re alive. Do you think they’ll have good news?” Sara asked.

The ceremony had come to an abrupt halt, when General Kam informed the UN delegation of a pressing development. A Federation shuttle barged into Venlil territory, and raised a series of alarms. Its pilot claimed to be the missing patrolman Slanek. He kept repeating that his human companion needed medical attention, in a hysterical voice.

I would've kept it on the down low until we knew more, but Secretary-General Meier wanted everyone aware of the situation. He believed that if the change of plans wasn't explained, rumors would spread that the Arxur were attacking.

The UN leader's presence was unexpected. We had never met in person, or spoken beyond video messages. But it seemed when Ambassador Noah told him of my plans, he wished to attend the memorial firsthand.

Many humans flocked to the docking port as the news dispersed; everyone on the station was eager to welcome the arrivals. The crowd numbered several hundred, once Venlil were added to the count. Terran paramedics were on stand-by, and the media were swarming to report any developments.

I knew why the predators wanted to see the state of the captives. They were trying to decide if the Federation was an enemy. In the wake of my shocking admission, they wanted to know if co-existence was even possible. This *was* a good sign, if the Federation military were civilized enough to hear a predator out, and set it free.

"I'm hopeful, guys." I swished my tail reassuringly. "If the Federation let your 'Marcel' fellow go, maybe I was wrong. Maybe they can see you for the sensitive and wonderful species you really are."

"I greenlit the plan for a pre-emptive strike days ago." Meier's voice was slow and gravelly, flowing with a practiced cadence. "The generals suggested that we needed to hit the key Gojid launchpoints. I have no way of recalling our bombers, even if I want to."

"Damn it all!" Noah cursed. "I knew we were too hasty. The Federation will see this as an unprovoked attack. We're going to ruin all chances of peace."

I patted the Ambassador on the shoulder, hoping to quell his emotions. His brown eyes softened, and he gave me an appreciative nod. There was no sense in lamenting what was already set in stone. All we could do now was address the consequences together.

Proximity alarms shrieked, as our sensors detected an unknown vessel within bombing range. The UN generals switched them off,

then granted permission for the inbound ship to dock. A few Terran soldiers lingered near their officers with assault rifles, in case of a trap. Their paranoia and suspicion had soared to new heights, since they learned the galaxy wanted to kill them.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that such deception was a predator's tactic. Playing at empathy would never be the Federation's modus operandi.

The exterior airlock creaked open, and a Federation shuttle descended from the inky backdrop. It followed the station's landing beacon to glide through the opening, and mounted its footings into the docking port with surgical precision. The craft wasn't big enough to fit more than four individuals, and that was if they stacked on top of each other. The soldiers relaxed, satisfied that an ambush force was ruled out.

It only took a few seconds for the port to repressurize, but I could sense the humans' restlessness. Anxious murmurs cycled through the crowd. Waiting, on the cusp of certainty, fueled the darker side of their imagination. The partition between the reception area and the dock receded, once the sensors determined it was safe.

A silver-gray Venlil poked his head from the spacecraft, which drew a few cheers from our people. A bandage wound its way around his ears, tying down the lone black tuft of hair on his forehead. The wrappings were soaked through with rich, orange fluid. That fresh bleeding suggested he needed medical attention himself.

The human paramedics exchanged looks, as there was no sign of their man. They shouldered their way past the Venlil. I could only see their backs, but they seemed to stiffen as they laid eyes on the interior. What had they seen that we had not? How severe were the human's injuries?

The predators toted a stretcher inside, and summoned a gurney to wait by the ship. Loud calls thundered above the chatter to clear a path. That meant Marcel was alive, but I had to wonder why he couldn't walk out under his own power. It also raised the question of how he incurred such a condition in the first place.

Sara pressed a hand to her mouth. "My God. What have they done?"

"I…I am more grateful to you than ever, Tarva," Noah breathed,

shaken to the core. “I should’ve never questioned your decision. I see now what you saved us from.”

Similar cries erupted from the onlookers, as the paramedics emerged with the captured human. Marcel’s malnourishment was apparent at first glance. His skin hugged his bones tightly, and his stomach was a flat depression beneath his ribcage. I wasn’t sure if it was the starvation, or the vicious injuries, that caused his breathing to sound so strained.

The poor guy’s face was mashed to a pulp, bruised and bloodied. Whoever beat the human seemed to take particular offense to his binocular eyes. The way the sockets were turning black made my stomach flip. A metal band was fitted to his neck, and the skin beneath was marred with minor burns. Why was that choker still on him? Nobody had taken it off?

The Venlil almost seemed more incensed than the humans. The thought of the Federation doing that to their buddy sparked a… predatory rage. My own blood boiled at such a grave injustice. Noah was right; that would’ve been him if I allowed it. I was wavering on whether I wanted the humans to show mercy to my old friends after all.

“Stop filming this,” I hissed at our media personnel. “Show some respect.”

Meier crossed his arms. “No, film it. On the condition that you’ll show it *everywhere*. I want everyone to see this. To document how the Federation treated one of ours. When we declare war on these bastards, I don’t want anyone saying it’s for no reason.”

“Whoa, hold up. If they realized their mistake, and let him go…” Noah whispered. “Maybe they’re sorry, and wish to make amends?”

“They didn’t realize anything!” Slanek’s horizontal pupils snapped toward us, as he overheard the Ambassador’s comment. “The captain was going to kill Marcel, and they’re still planning to bomb Earth.”

“What stopped them from killing him? Did you talk them down?” I asked, in a soft voice.

“I tried, Governor. But they wouldn’t listen! We escaped by the skin of our teeth, because of first officer Recel. He incapacitated the captain, and escorted us off the ship.”

The Secretary-General frowned. “What happened to this Recel?”

“I brought him with us, sir. He’s on the ship…I can’t get him to come out. This isn’t, er, exactly what I promised him.”

My ears swiveled toward the shuttle. I thought I could detect the sound of terrified whines, amidst the commotion. Meier looked like he wanted to retrieve the first officer himself, and was about to start in that direction. Though the gray-haired human didn’t exude hostility, I feared he might escalate Recel’s emotions to a blinding panic.

“Let me handle this,” I said to the humans. “Noah, Sara, you remember how hard it was for us…and there were only two of you.”

Meier glanced at the astronauts, and fell back as their nods affirmed my words. I ducked into the spacecraft to look around.

Huddled beneath the pilot’s chair was a Kolshian male, with a dark blanket over his head. It was a pitiful attempt at camouflage; it would be amusing, at a brighter time. The movement of the fabric, and the outline of his form were obvious giveaways. I imagine the human paramedics noticed Recel, but were too preoccupied with Marcel to coax him out.

Within closer range, the whines sounded more like muffled screams. I clicked my claws on the floor, so Recel would know the approaching person wasn’t a human. The officer peeked out from under his tarp. His bulbous, orange eyes lit up with recognition.

“Governor Tarva!” Recel exclaimed. “You’re…alive?”

“Of course I’m alive. What made you think I wasn’t?!”

“It’s just, er, nobody has actually seen you in months. And this station is infested with predators; I saw them through the window. Lurking, waiting.”

“It’s not infested, and they have good reason to ‘lurk.’ They were curious and worried, and now, they’re rather upset. Hell, I’m upset too.”

“Oh, please help me, Tarva. This is a nightmare, and I’ve done it to myself. I just want to wake up, you know? Get me out of here! Please.”

“Calm down. Everything is alright now. Tell me, what is it that the

humans are doing that's bothering you?"

"Slanek said there were 'just a couple', damn it. Two or three, I could tolerate but…looking at all those predators? Pure agony. It feels like my chest is on fire. I don't know how you bear it."

"I know *exactly* how you feel. It will pass."

"You can't know that."

"But I do. How about I introduce you to my first human friend? Just one of them."

"Just one. Just one, one!" Recel whined, rocking back and forth. "Okay. Just one."

The Kolshian was clearly on the brink of a nervous breakdown, but I decided to move forward with that tepid affirmation. This guy defied a superior officer, and sacrificed his career to save a human. That wasn't a risk that someone took without good reason.

There had to be some part of Recel that already accepted the predators' true nature. It was a matter of getting through to him, of bringing his logical mind back into the equation. Whether it was reason or empathy that struck home, it didn't make a difference.

"NOAH! Come here," I called.

The male astronaut hurried in, rushing to my side. "Is everything alright? What's going on, Tarva?"

"Hm. The first time I saw Noah, I thought he was feral. Can you imagine answering that hail?" I waved a paw in the human's direction, and Recel shuddered. "All of his teeth were showing, and those murderous eyes were like something out of a nightmare. He looked like the meanest, nastiest creature in the universe."

The Ambassador sighed. "Ah Governor, you always flatter me."

"Shush! I'm getting to the important part," I huffed. "But anyhow, the humans' words were about peace. There was such a disparity between *that* appearance and the things they said. My brain couldn't reconcile it."

"I'm just saying, Tarva, you could fake the *occasional* compliment." Noah shot me a coy smile. I had been around the predators too long if I could differentiate snarls, hadn't I? "Talk about my winning personality? My exquisite physique? Pretend you liked me?"

“I do like you! Stop fishing! At any rate…there was this collection of little things the humans did that made me think ‘maybe.’ The odd doubt. But looking at them dredged up all my worst memories, so I shut out that voice. I wanted them gone.”

“Then why did you stop Sovlin from g-getting rid of them? What happened?” Recel stammered.

“I teared up just a little, and the first thing Noah did was try to comfort me. I realized that I never gave him a chance. No unfeeling creature would pick up on emotional nuances like they do. That’s when I knew. When did it click for you?”

“It…he…the instant Slanek showed signs of distress, Marcel tried to protect him. It was something he said, that he only cared for the Venlil’s safety.” The Kolshian’s eyes became distant, as though he was reliving the moment. “Even when the captain had a gun against his head, the predator was trying to soothe his friend. And I believed him, if just for a moment.”

“You sensed it then, Recel. You know that nobody could fake it that perfectly.”

“I know. But, I feel…”

“Forget about the feel. You’re going to walk out of here with me and Noah. We’ll find you a room, and I want you to rest up.”

“And then?”

“Then, we’re going to determine who is responsible for what happened to Marcel. The humans will decide what to do about it. It’s your decision, but I’d like you to speak to them. You represent the Federation, as far as we’re concerned.”

Noah nodded. “As would I. We don’t have to be enemies.”

Recel rose on unstable legs and dusted himself off. Those first steps into the open were tentative and frightful; he coiled his tail around mine for support.

Venturing out through the sea of humans, many of whom were openly staring, must have been a daunting task. But he managed to hold back the scream which I sensed building in his chest. The officer lowered his gaze to the floor, and marched ahead through the chemical fever.

Perhaps this man was a spark of hope that not everyone would

write humanity off on sight. I prayed that Earth could find other friends in the galaxy; and that our newfound ally would find the courage to prove that it was a possibility.

Chapter 15

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: September 3, 2136

Nursing the human back to health became my obsession. The doctors were optimistic that Marcel would make a full recovery, but I was determined not to vacate his side. There was no way I was leaving his well-being to chance, ever again.

My claws tightened around the fork, stabbing into a block of tofu. The spongy protein folded into the prongs, and I brought it up toward the human's mouth. My gaze lingered on the pointy canines beside his incisors, which looked perfect for tearing flesh.

It felt unnatural, placing my paw so near to a predator's teeth, while offering it food. A pins and needles sensation danced at the base of my toes, which I promptly ignored.

"Slanek, I can do this myself," Marcel protested.

The predator was lounging in a hospital bed, propped up against some pillows. After a fresh shave and some washing up, my human looked more like his old self. A nose splint concealed the deformed appendage, and stitches mended the gashes on his cheek. Fluids and medication were distributed intravenously, which brought life back into his complexion.

I glared at him. "But I'm not going to let you. And that's that."

Marcel rolled his eyes, but allowed me to insert the protein between his lips. I scrutinized him as he chewed. It was wonderful to see him eating real food after his long hunger, but I didn't want to lose sight of the big picture.

Human medicine was primitive compared to ours, a school of medievalism. My vigilance was the only hope at preventing complications. All I knew was that Marcel's diet was essential to his recovery; it was my intention for him to consume every calorie the medical staff gave us.

I prepared a forkful of greens, which looked scrumptious and herby, and shoved it at him. The red-haired primate sighed. He tugged the plate from my stubborn paws, and set it on the bedside table.

"You gotta stop babying me. I'm fine, buddy, really." The human

began to sit up, and grimaced as pain scorched across his ribs. “See? Good as new.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “No, you’re not!”

“I’m on the mend. This is the new normal, and that’s okay. I’m tougher than you think I am.”

“You’re very strong, and resilient, and brave…but…”

“What?”

“I almost lost you, Marc. And it scares me how much that hurts.”

“Aw. It’s over now, Slanek. I’m never going to let anyone hurt us again, okay? Come here.”

I curled up on the bed, and placed my chin on the predator’s thigh. Marcel reached out with his nimble fingers. The same hesitancy that always flashed on his face, when he was worried about spooking me, surfaced. His hand hovered over the back of my neck for several seconds, and my heartrate skyrocketed. What was he doing?

My instincts despised the location of his paw, and the way his nails were aimed at my head. It was a slash away from my throat. Everything about that body language mirrored a predator about to pounce; no amount of trust could alter those ominous cues. My eyes blinked shut, and I summoned all of my willpower to remain still.

I felt a light touch on my ear. The human palmed the right one gently, then moved to the other. The breath I didn’t realize I had been holding in escaped.

Marcel beamed when he saw me relax, and took that as encouragement to continue. His fingers darted beneath my chin, and ruffled the fur by my throat. The human’s claws nicked my skin; they were rather dull, for a predator’s offensive weapons. Oddly enough, it was more gratifying than painful.

A happy mewl emanated from my chest. I nuzzled against his side, and flipped onto my back.

“You’re so cute!” he whispered.

Without thinking, I had exposed the most soft and vulnerable organ; my stomach. Marcel tickled my belly with vigor, which was quite the overwhelming sensation. I was embarrassed by my undignified squeals and laughs, but my control was slipping. I rolled around in

delirium, thrashing and kicking.

The human had to catch me when I almost tumbled off the bed. He winced from the abdominal strain, but refused to drop me. Affection and warmth shined in his eyes.

“Am I interrupting something?” Sara stood in the doorway, amusement on her face. She stared at me, the blankets on the floor, then back at me.

“Actually, you were, but not what you think,” Marcel chuckled. “What can I do for you?”

“You look better. We’re all happy to see it,” she replied. “But I just wanted a quick word with Slanek. Alone.”

I tilted my head at the scientist, confused. Had the humans decided to blame me for my inability to prevent Marcel’s injuries? Did they think he would be better off with someone stronger, and more competent at their civic duties? I couldn’t fault them if that were the case.

My human released his grip, and gave me an encouraging wave. A paralyzing reluctance made me slow to follow Sara, so I dragged my feet to a secluded spot in the hallway. A mature individual would accept the consequences of their own failure; especially when that failure landed their best friend in critical condition, a whisker away from death. *I can’t let him go, though.*

I slumped my shoulders. “Look, Sara…I am so sorry for what happened to Marc. My best friend was terrorized by a madman, and I was nothing more than a liability. I take full responsibility for everything, and accept whatever the UN has decided. If there is anything that I can do to make it right—”

“Slow down.” The scientist raised a pale hand. “Nobody blames you, least of all Marcel. I think having you around is helping him immensely.”

“You do?”

“It’s obvious. He’s trying to hide it, but I figure he’s in a lot of pain.”

“That’s what I was worried about. So then, um, what is it you needed to speak to me about? Oh stars, is there bad news about Marc?”

“Perhaps. It’s not clear yet. If I remember correctly, he was frightened of torture by aliens before this, yeah?” Sara waited for my nod. She seemed concerned about how to phrase her next words. “I think you need to be warned about how humans react to trauma. Our brains often have… difficulty processing it.”

I studied her expression closely. “What are you trying to say? Is Marcel going to go insane?”

“That’s not a polite word, Slanek. Everyone reacts differently. Marcel could be fine…and I hope he is,” she said. “But after what he’s been through, you must be prepared for drastic changes in mood and personality. He could become depressed, forgetful, irritable, or even hostile.”

“Hostile?”

“Nightmares and flashbacks are common in these cases. That can incite all sorts of negative reactions.”

My eyes widened in surprise. It had never occurred to me that humans relived their worst experiences as vividly as we did. When I imagined how their brains worked, I always assumed it was different. No wonder Marcel was in a prolonged fog, after watching the Arxur torture clips on the first day.

Why would a predator have such an overblown fear response, and cling to memories of prior threats? They were on the other side of that equation in nature. Even if humans descended from prey animals, they hadn’t been that for millions of years.

I guess it proves humans are just people, like us. That their emotions resemble ours.

“You didn’t say negative. You said hostile,” I pointed out.

Sara shuffled on her feet. “Well, the memories trigger our ‘fight-or-flight’ response. Some people lash out with physical violence, though they don’t mean to. I think that unlikely here, but it needs to be stated as a possibility.”

My breath hitched in my throat, though I tried not to show my fright to the scientist. Physical violence? Being assaulted by a predator wasn’t exactly on my bucket list. If a human lunged at me, without warning, I doubted I could keep my composure. It would be tough to brush that off.

The thought of Marcel, with his meaty hands clenched around my windpipe, stirred all of my subconscious fears. But I knew that wasn't him. My human hadn't tried to eat me, even when he was starving. This 'mindless killer' preserved my welfare, to his own detriment, and never displayed anything but kindness toward me.

As long as it was unintentional, I decided I could forgive him for spontaneous violence. Sara deemed it improbable, so in all likelihood, it wouldn't happen. The prospect of mental torture, that would drive Marcel to violate his principles, was more concerning to me.

"Why are you telling me this?" I questioned.

Maybe Sara thinks I wasn't being supportive enough. Or she'll teach me which signs to watch for. Human mannerisms are as alien as alien gets.

"I don't want you to fault Marcel, or to think it's proof that humans are evil. I know how frightened you Venlil are of us. If any of those symptoms would be too much to deal with, it may be best that we find you a more suitable partner."

My ears flattened against my head. Is that what the Terran scientific community believed we thought of them? That we saw them as interchangeable demons, and volunteered just to vindicate that conclusion?

That's right. We risked our lives, waiting for them to slip up, so we could say 'Gotcha!' I thought sarcastically.

There was nobody in the galaxy: human, Venlil, or otherwise, more suitable than Marcel. Being around him was pleasant and easy. I wasn't going to discard him the second a challenge presented itself.

"You want me to leave him, because he *might* be ill?" I hissed. "I don't want another 'partner.' I want Marcel, and I'll deal with whatever happens."

"No, no, we don't *want* you to leave. That's the opposite of what we want." Sara took a step back, trying to appear non-threatening. "But your feelings and well-being are important too, Slanek. You must not discount yourself, out of some sense of guilt or obligation."

"Obligation?! I love him! Did you consider Marcel's feelings at all? To even suggest that I should abandon him, right when he needs me the most…it's cruel! Heartless!"

“We are thinking of Marcel. Listen, he is in a fragile state right now. You are the main thing reminding him he is human. That someone cares for him. What would hurt him the most is to hear you call him a monster.”

A furious growl rumbled in my throat. “I would never! Short of him eating my family in front of me, anyway. I hate that anyone would suggest otherwise.”

“Then I’ll leave you be.” Sara’s voice was measured, but there was pleasure in her eyes at my response. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

I flicked my ears in acknowledgement, and scampered back toward my human’s chamber without hesitation. After the mention of being pried away from Marcel, all I wanted was to have him back in my sight. What if he had an episode while I was gone? Once he was in my periphery, I could rest assured that he was okay.

Marcel had cleaned his plate during my absence, and was seated on the edge of the bed. His predatory eyes were staring into space, unblinking. There was the hint of a twitch by his lip, as if he were biting his cheek.

The human jumped a little when I leapt onto the mattress. I coiled my tail around his wrist, and noted how he slowly unclenched his fist.

“Slanek,” he sighed. “I missed you.”

Before, I had attributed his aloof moments to the primitive narcotics in the IVs. But in light of Sara’s words, it was apparent that a different culprit was to blame. I felt ashamed of myself, for not picking up on the cues sooner. My preoccupation with his physical injuries caused me to overlook the obvious.

“What were you thinking about? Just now?” I blurted.

The human forced a smile. “You don’t want to know.”

“I do. You can tell me anything, Marc.”

“Not this.”

“Try me.”

His gaze darkened. “I’m thinking I want to kill Sovlin.”

“Get in line.”

“I’m quite serious. I was fantasizing about it. Does that make me a bad person? A ‘bloodthirsty’ predator?”

“I’d shed no tears over his death. It’s not fair that he got away scot-free. You’re a good person, who is trying to process something terrible…and yes, has more aggressive instincts. You didn’t deserve *any* of what he did to you.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I should’ve asked about your mental health sooner. How do those memories make you feel? Are you able to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. When Sovlin was about to shoot me, I felt…*relief* that it was over. Profound relief. I was ready for him to pull the trigger. I was only sorry that you had to see it. And that Zarn was kidnapping you because of me.”

“Don’t worry about me. All that matters to me is that you’re here, and you recover.”

“That’s why I need you to let me push myself, Slanek. I heard we’re going to war with the Gojids…and I want to join. Even if it’s just to fly a ship or run logistics, I need to be cleared for action.”

“But you’re safer here. Why would you want to risk your life again, so soon?”

“To go after Sovlin, to deal with my anger, all of it. I have to do something, and I didn’t know how to tell you. It’s being idle that drives me mad.”

“Fine. When are we leaving?”

The human blinked. “We?”

“I’m coming with you, if I have to stow away in your duffel bag. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Moisture glistened in Marcel’s hazel eyes, and a low chuckle rumbled from his vocal cords. A silent vow formed in my mind, that I would protect him better this time around. Even if it meant shipping off to an active warzone, surrounded by trained predators with guns.

Something told me that I wouldn’t be the only Venlil tagging along for the humans’ war efforts. Though there was no formal declaration from the governor yet, I think we had chosen a side.

The fates of our species were intertwined, for better or for worse.

Chapter 16

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: September 3, 2136

It was a maintenance worker, sweeping the ship for any stragglers, who found the doctor and I caged in the beast's filthy pen.

The reek of waste and blood had been overpowering in the cell; a sickening reminder that the predator had walked those very floors. It felt beneath my dignity to lie in such squalor, with no company but the sulking Zarn.

I could still see Marcel's hideous face when I closed my eyes. My heart seized at the thought of those sunken eyes, soulless and scorching. The sound of the human's voice grating at my ears, as he tried to offer some deceitful words, was unforgettable too. When I saw my first officer chumming it up with that savage, it was no wonder I saw red.

What a nightmarish creature it was, I thought. *How could anyone ever care for it?*

Recel's betrayal stung more than the burning in my leg ever could. I had taken the Kolshian under my wing for decades, and mentored him into a confident officer that commanded respect. How could he shoot me… for that animal? After what the Federation had endured, wasn't I entitled to a few minutes of retribution? The human's suffering paled in comparison to the children mauled as Arxur toys, or the worlds razed in radiation and fire.

The first officer's most offensive statement was comparing me to the Arxur. Since when was protecting my crew from an existential threat a crime? Everyone would be happier with one less human prowling the universe, other than the Venlil, I suppose. They needed to be rescued before the predators sank their claws any deeper.

"Sovlin," Zarn growled. "The Prime Minister is on the line. Are you well enough to speak to her?"

It was arduous to round up the crew from various shuttles, but we managed to put the band back together. Placing a medical official,

with no combat expertise, as acting first officer wasn't my first choice, but I needed someone who would support me on matters of human policy. Keeping the crew on a leash was my primary objective.

I raised my hobbled leg, studying the azure-stained bandage. "Of course I am. Recel blew off a limb, not my head! Put her on screen."

The video call flickered to life, revealing a glaring Piri. "Sovlin. Tell me how you manage to lose a predator, in the mere days since your last check-in! The Federation is going to freak out."

Word of Tarva's folly traveled across the Federation within days, after we detained our unwelcome guest. Panic was spreading through civilian channels, and public pressure was mounting for an immediate response. Galactic leaders arranged an emergency convention to discuss joint action, but it would take days for everyone to arrive at the designated meeting spot.

More time would be squandered coordinating the forces of hundreds of independent powers. The Gojidi Union was not content to sit on its paws, while vacillating fools debated the obvious choice. Destructive measures were necessary at once, before the humans lashed out at the Venlil.

We were en route to a Gojid border station to rendezvous with our bombing partners. Launching for Earth felt like my destiny. I was ecstatic to join the mission, and hoped we could cripple the human breeding grounds. The escapees wouldn't have time to warn humanity, so our attack would come as an unexpected blow.

Now that humans were spacefaring, it was unlikely to eliminate them entirely. But with any luck, their numbers would be reduced to insignificance, and the remnants would wipe each other out with their aggression. The damn predators were a smear on the name of sentience.

"Must your head always be elsewhere? I demand an answer, Captain!" Piri hissed. "How did the predator escape?"

"I don't know how to say this, but First Officer Recel shot me and released it," I answered.

The prime minister recoiled in shock. "Recel? Why, he's served under you for decades. He's practically Gojid at this point. What pushed him to such reckless action?"

“The humans seem to have an ability to charm others that we didn’t account for. They appear to be able to manipulate empathy, and to pretend to be like the rest of us. My first officer said I was being *unfair* to the flesh-eater, if you believe that.”

“Well then…I’ll put out a warrant for Recel’s arrest. I’m sure the Kolshians will side with us. There’s no excuse for a veteran, who just watched our briefing videos, releasing a human.” She tapped a few buttons on her console, most likely penning a transmission to the Federation. “At least we’ve gathered some key information from this debacle. The humans are more intelligent than the grays, and more cooperative.”

“With respect, ma’am, what makes you say that?”

“The Arxur would have never made it to space without our interference. But these monkeys did it without outside assistance.”

“I suppose you’re right. That only makes their schemes and ruses more complex. They seem quite capable of mirroring empathetic responses.”

“Indeed. Let’s not forget, Sovlin, the Venlil are one of the weakest, and most emotional races in the galaxy. And that’s by our standards. The humans will enjoy turning on them.”

“My thoughts exactly. Whatever Tarva or Recel say, the only good human is a dead human. And I’m going to see to it that there’s a lot of those by next week.”

“I commend your courage. Oh, and Captain…be warned that we’ve lost contact with two military outposts that were slated to join the bombing run. Our scouts are going to look in, but I’d stay alert.”

I flared my nostrils in dismay. The humans would have had to know about our scheme days ago to launch any countermeasures, and that was inexplicable. Clairvoyance wasn’t a predator trait, to my knowledge.

Tarva wouldn’t be idiotic enough to tell humanity about the Federation’s earlier plans, would she? That would be begging for retribution. Venlil involvement in the plot was extensive, according to my files. Due to Earth’s proximity to their borders, they prodded the Federation to act quicker. The decades our leaders spent dawdling was time for the predators to advance.

Perhaps the humans had kidnapped some Venlil quietly and were

torturing them, out of Tarva's eye. There were a myriad of ways they could have obtained the information.

"I'll report if I hear anything. It could be the Arxur, though it's impeccable timing if so," I said.

Piri flicked her ears. "Perhaps. Is it bad that I almost hope it's the grays? Ugh…take care of yourself, Sovlin."

The call blinked out, and I turned my attention to the viewport. The blue dot on screen was an unnamed Gojid colony, with a population around twenty thousand. Its border location lacked appeal for potential settlers, due to the inherent peril; its only drawing point was dirt-cheap housing.

The humans will push everyone closer to home soon enough. Our resources are already strained with a single enemy, I pondered.

Our military launchpoint was lodged on a large asteroid, just beyond the colony's orbit. It functioned as a hub for bomber squadrons and defensive units. I spotted a few Gojid patrol ships, adrift in the system's outer reaches. Spacecraft were ready to fight at all hours of the day, in case of any Arxur incursions.

Everything appeared to be normal, but Piri's warning lingered in my mind. Predators loved stealth and ambush tactics. If our attackers were the humans, that was more proof they were the same as the grays. It was their nature to catch others off-guard and helpless.

"Halt out of docking range!" I shouted. "Scan the perimeter for ship activity. Better safe than sorry."

It could do no harm to supplement our station's intel from a different vantage point. Sensors didn't reveal any subspace disruptions or gravitational disturbances, at first glance. However, there were a few stray radio signals by the system's gas giants that seemed peculiar. That caught my attention, and I decided it merited further investigation.

"What are those coordinates you've input? Why are we turning the viewport?" Zarn asked.

I tapped my claws nervously. "Nothing, I hope. We'll see soon enough."

Zooming in on the source of the EMF anomaly, a formation of

angular ships became visible. Gasps sounded across the bridge. My spines raised in an instant, and I gaped at the startling image. How could an enemy have gotten within the system unseen?

Lurking near celestial bodies with high masses to evade detection was possible, in theory. But there wasn't a more dangerous place to disengage warp. While a strong gravitational field masked an incoming subspace trail, it would leave the ships at risk of being drawn into orbit.

It would require incredible patience as well. To avoid discovery, those vessels needed to engage in a series of tiny jumps. That was the only way to ensure that their trail didn't poke into real space at an unwanted moment.

Did those ships really hop between high-gravity spots, and wait for their drive to respool each time? Not utilizing continuous warp transit would increase travel time tenfold.

That's no Arxur strategy, I thought. *These humans learn quickly, and it seems they gamble with their lives.*

Knowing the Terran position, the computer was able to tease out sensor readings. A rough estimation of their capabilities would help us concoct a plan of attack.

"What is their shield capacity?" I barked.

Zarn's eyes stretched wide in panic. "Uh, I don't know? How do I read this shit?!"

"I miss Recel immensely. Let me see." With a sigh of irritation, I pulled up the data feed on my workstation. "Why the primitive… not a trace of ion generators! I don't think they've figured out how to power shields."

"Sounds like great news! What are your orders, sir?" the doctor asked.

My disappointment with Zarn was already mounting. A lackey wasn't what I desired, deep down.

I wanted a first officer with their own ideas, who was willing to challenge me when their thoughts were contrary. The thought of Recel wasting in a cell, or being toasted over a fire by the humans, felt like such a damn waste. A fine man, who threw away his career over some misplaced idealism.

“Charge the railgun, but slow and subtle. We don’t want to alarm the humans.” A sharp pain stabbed through my leg, the first sign of the painkillers waning. “In the meantime, let’s amplify and intercept those radio signals. I think two of the ships are talking to each other.”

While Zarn stood around like a lost child, the comms station pounced on my order. Static fed through the PA, an incoherent buzzing.

The technicians took a few moments to fine-tune the settings, and my ears perked up in anticipation. Catching the predators red-handed, gloating over the prospect of eating and torturing sentients, would squash any doubts. It should even be enough to win back the Venlil.

I wonder if Tarva knows about the cheap tactics her…friends employ, I mused. *What does she see in these skin-eaters? She’ll be begging us to take the Venlil back by tomorrow.*

“may…too harsh on them.” A thunderous voice echoed over the loudspeakers, sinking in to its captive audience. It was so quiet on the bridge that you could hear a pin drop. “The Arxur traumatized the xenos, and we’re just making it worse. They’ll think we’re just like them, Sani. This’ll be their proof.”

“They’re going to attack Earth if we don’t,” came the tired reply. “It’s a military base, nothing more. It’s fair game. Meier didn’t put any civilian targets on the list.”

“But the Gojids haven’t done anything yet. There’s still time for them to change their mind. We should have tried to negotiate.”

“Raj, are you mad? They would drop bombs on London, Mumbai, or Lagos without thinking for a second. They don’t want to talk to us.”

“I know. I just signed on to fight the Arxur, and now…it’s not like I imagined.”

“This is *not* the time for second thoughts. We’ll offer medical assistance to any survivors. I’m certain the UN and the Venlil will try to broker peace, but right now, this is about surviving. This is about humanity.”

I blinked in confusion. Much of my crew looked dazed, as though they were having trouble processing the conversation. From the two humans’ words, you would think it was the Gojids who were the

villains in this scenario, not the stealth ships creeping in on a clueless station.

Why were those predator pilots talking like they felt sorry for us? Why did both of them sound like they wanted peace; as though it were their own objective?

Soft old fool, I cursed myself. *How did you almost fall for such a basic trap?*

It must be some sort of trickery, an empathetic ploy, in case anyone was listening in. If we hesitated to shoot the human craft, that lent them a strategic advantage. There was no other reason to talk, and give away their position.

It was that charm ability I mentioned to Piri. No wonder the Venlil had fallen for it, after prolonged exposure to their smooth tongues.

"Turn that off!" I hissed. "Delete all records of that conversation. They're trying to manipulate us."

"But how could they know we were listening, Sovlin?" a comms technician asked. "What if they actually meant that? And we just keep trying to harm them?"

"Humans don't understand what peace means, you numbskull! They're parroting something the Venlil told them."

The young analyst scowled. "Sir…you have the authority to get our station to stand down. I think we should hail them, and offer a truce. Then, we can see what they do. At least that way, we have no regrets."

"I have no regrets as is! If you want to talk to predators, you can get on a shuttle and fly over there yourself."

The word 'predator' seemed to snap the crew out of their trance, and I saw a few tail waves of agreement. The technician shuffled on his paws, before he pressed the delete button on his station. A high-pitched beep disrupted the silence, showing our weapons were charged and operational.

I leaned back in my chair. "Fire the railgun. The humans aren't getting this system."

"Fire at who?" Jemic, my weapons officer, pointed at the viewport in horror. "Where did they go?"

My eyes widened in panic. *The colony! They're making a run on the*

colony. Dammit, I knew it was a distraction!

I fired off a transmission to the station, warning them of the ambush. My heart felt heavy; I prayed that my communique reached them in time. My recommended course of action was to divert defenses to the colony, and prepare for an orbital raid.

The humans claimed they were attacking the base. But even if that were their stated mission, predators couldn't resist landing the killing blow on hapless prey, once in range. The colony was a much juicier target.

A solemn silence gripped the bridge, as we turned our own course toward the planet. Even with such a small population, there was no way we could evacuate in time. My stomach flipped at the thought of needless death; of another atmosphere choked in flame. This wasn't my first siege, but it never got easier.

We had to stop the humans from continuing the Arxur's legacy of destruction.

Chapter 17

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: September 3, 2136

Worst-case scenarios cycled through my mind, as the Gojid ships formed a defensive wall around the colony. I tried to imagine how the people on the ground felt; trapped and aware of the impending assault.

This sea of dots spanning the blue orb's circumference was all that stood between the innocent and hungry predators. Any angle that was overlooked was an opportunity for the humans to break through. We would stop any missiles from penetrating our ranks by throwing our craft in the way, if necessary.

The only way a battle with a predator ended, was with all of them dead, or all of us dead.

The primitive nature of the human craft was our primary hope. A single hit should be enough to dispatch their ships. Hell, the station's lasers might be able to chew through more than one at a time. Our weaponry was designed to tear through Arxur armor, and the Terrans' defenses were negligible.

"Sir. The ships have reappeared just out of targeting range," Jemic barked, a tremor in her voice. I hoped the weapons officer could keep her wits. "On a trajectory course for the base."

The viewport locked onto the hostiles. I watched as they veered off onto multiple headings, and altered their course to avoid any intercepting ships we launched. A laser lanced out from the station, a streak of brilliancy across the void. The shot connected with a Terran bomber, and obliterated the predator craft in a flash.

Happiness fluttered in my chest, though it was tempered by nerves. It was encouraging that we had attained the first kill of the war.

The humans, in response, spewed plasma at the approaching Gojid ships. They seemed to hope that would ward us off, like brandishing a torch to keep a beast at bay. Weapons of that caliber couldn't deal more than minor damage, but I knew they had to preserve their main payload for their target.

It occurred to me that we had simplified the task of bombing the station for the humans. The predators were flooring it toward their stated target, and in many ways, my suggestions cleared the path. There wasn't a single sign of deviation, which boggled my mind.

The asteroid base dispatched as many ships as it could, and left its own defenses barren in the process. When given the choice, our commanders prioritized civilian lives over military infrastructure.

Things can be replaced. Stations can be rebuilt, I chided myself. *Lives cannot. There are children down there.*

I couldn't help but wonder, for a split second, if this was a lapse in judgment on my part. Where was that predatory sadism; the one Zarn said humans used on their own world? The last thing I wanted was to cost the Gojidi Union valuable resources. It was worse if some soldiers didn't make it from their barracks. Their deaths would weigh on my conscience for years.

But there was no way a predator could override their bloodlust, particularly while engaged in warfare! It was a matter of time before the humans rounded on our position. At least a few ships had to give into temptation, even if the majority could resist.

"Shoot the bastards! Blast them out of the sky!" I roared.

Jemic sighed. "I just said they're out of range, sir. We need to move closer."

"We are NOT abandoning our position. The second the planet is vulnerable, they'll pounce."

My mind yearned to fight the humans myself, but I had to remember the stakes at hand. We were consigned to watching, as though this skirmish were some spectator sport. Zarn was cheering each time a Terran vessel went up in a fireball, which earned strange glances from the nearest crew.

The predators weaved erratic patterns to avoid termination, but their spirals and zigzags weren't fast enough. Every crackle of the laser purged one of the vermin. The station's defenses were slow to recharge, but their effectiveness was dazzling. In fairness, it seemed a love tap could take out a Terran ship; their workmanship was rather flimsy.

Gojid craft remained hot on the humans' heels, and spit our own concentrated plasma at them. There was no breathing space for our

attackers. The predators rocketed up to max acceleration, and towed a tighter line toward the base. It was wonderful to see our ships chasing the humans; how the tables had turned, from the natural order. The hunter was the hunted.

“Captain, the predators are showing no interest in the colony. I don’t see the harm in taking a few ships to the battlefield,” Jemic pressed.

“They’re just trying to lose their pursuers. If they can bait us away from the colony’s defense, that’s what they want.”

Her spines bristled. “I hate feeling powerless.”

“As do I. Zarn, why don’t you make yourself useful?” I gestured toward the doctor, who was transfixed by the battle. “Establish contact with Piri, if at all possible. Make her aware of the predators’ tactics, so she can relay a warning to any nearby installations.”

The Takkan returned an eager tail swish, and scrambled to reopen communication lines. My gaze darted back to the viewport. I looked just in time to catch a glimpse of a Terran fighter, taking a round to the belly. The plasma compromised its hull integrity, and reduced it to a fractured heap of metal.

There was no hesitation from the Gojid chasers, to bombard the incapacitated ship with fire. Nobody would be foolish enough to leave a predator alive; they needed to be taken out of the fight with permanence. As long as such a monster was still kicking, they could have a final trick up their sleeves.

The human vessels clustered back together, and opted to deal with the gaining pursuers one at a time. They peppered the closest Gojid ship with fire, and concentrated their strikes on its drive column. The patroller’s engine went up in a colossal flare; debris was flung in all directions. Our other allies were forced to drop back, to avoid getting swept up in the blast’s wake.

Stars… I hate humans, I seethed. *They don’t quit or retreat! I curse my ancestors, for not confirming their extinction centuries ago. This is going to be a tedious and costly war, even if we win.*

The predators had endured a hailstorm of fire, and pressed nearer to the base all the same. No matter how many of their brethren were reduced to scrap, they persevered. Watching the humans’ fearlessness, I couldn’t help but envy their natural disposition. They

shrugged off losses with that callous disregard for life they were so famed for.

We felt our casualties. That was the Federation's downfall against the Arxur. It was emotion that lost us the war. Predators saw only the mission; the kill.

"Captain, we have to do something," Jemic growled.

I flicked my ears. "It's too late. They're almost within orbital range."

While the Gojid defenses could deal with the humans handily, they wouldn't win the race against time. The predators could survive just long enough; pesky monsters. Sensing that their goal was within reach, our opponents found a final burst of speed. The lead bombers dispensed their payloads, and cylindrical missiles homed in on the asteroid's surface. I braced myself for the inevitable aftermath.

The Gojid patrollers lunged forward in desperate pursuit, but they were already too late. Explosions detonated across the complex, tearing through the expansive stone buildings. Flame enveloped anything in the explosions' proximity; smoke plumes bushed up within the artificial atmosphere.

Hangar roofs caved in, and buried any ships we failed to get off the ground. The powerful laser was out of commission too, since our orbital defenses were tucked in the center of the base. Bunkers and training areas were pummeled into submission. I wondered how many servicemen were trapped beneath the rubble.

The humans followed up their first volley with another barrage. There was no pause or emotion; though I don't know why I thought there would be. The subsequent explosions ensured that nothing was standing, and reduced any likelihood of survivors.

The horror on the bridge was a choking atmosphere. Amidst my grief, I couldn't help but feel responsible for this calamity. Our local garrison could have stopped them, if there had been a few more ships at our disposal.

Why are the humans not turning toward the colony? They're alive, and I think still have some bombs. They should come to us, any minute now.

The predator ships dipped away, but were unable to shrug off their pursuers. The Terrans branched off on individual courses; they knew we couldn't chase after all of them. Some of those vile

creatures would escape…*wait.*

I shook my head in disbelief. *They can't be leaving.*

"The humans did exactly what they said!" My head swiveled in the direction of the voice. It was that unruly comms analyst from earlier. "They never intended to attack any civilians."

"They just annihilated a military base, and that's your reaction?" I snarled.

"None of the evidence suggests that they wanted to. We forced their hand," the technician growled.

I glowered at the scene in the stars, considering the predators' departure. What more evidence did one need, beyond looking at their faces? Their bloodstained history was just the icing on the cake, confirming what our eyes already knew.

The humans could be faking a retreat, to lull us into a false sense of security. The bombers were still within close range of the asteroid, and it would take them awhile to escape the system. Their strategy could be to double back, after we assumed they were leaving.

That, or our considerable presence by the colony dissuaded them from heeding their impulses. These creatures were more intelligent, and slightly more self-aware than the Arxur; they must have recognized that they were outmatched. That was a sufficient explanation, wasn't it?

I forced myself to lower my hackles. "What's your name, kid?"

"Rumi."

"Rumi? I respect your drive to question everything, even common knowledge, but this isn't the right cause to fight for. If humans were a species of any merit, do you think that the Federation would've dug up some argument to spare them? In *decades* of study?"

"I don't know."

"Think about it; that goes to anyone agreeing with the young man here. And yes, we did force their hand. We forced the humans to concede civilian targets, because of our overwhelming force."

"How so? We're in the wrong place."

"We're in the right place. Our presence deterred the humans from attacking anything else. Everyone should be proud of themselves

today. We saved twenty thousand lives."

Rumi slumped his shoulders. "If you say so."

I imagine our allies had grown as restless as my crew. Seeing that the promise of the humans raiding the colony wasn't panning out, some captains may be tempted to pursue the fleeing ships. Sensors indicated that many were gearing up their drives, and that our meticulous formation was dissolving.

Now was not the time for this. The predators were still in system; all we needed was a few minutes of patience to save the colony.

I leaned over my microphone. "Gojid vessels, hold your positions! Do not let the humans bait you into weakening our defense."

"I'm not just sitting here, dammit." A voice pierced through our encrypted military channel. "We are going to attempt search-and-rescue, and render medical assistance to anyone alive."

My eyes darted about the viewport, searching for any signs of movement. A Gojid hospital craft had crept away from our ranks, and commenced a blazing run toward the base. Its course placed it directly in the path of an escaping human. Sensors read that the Terran ship had target-locked the vessel, and their weapons were charging.

"Turn back now!" I pleaded into the comms. "You won't be rescuing anyone if you're turned to slag. I'll escort you myself when the humans are gone."

The first responders pressed forward in defiance, and diverted their central power to shields. The fleeing predator hurled a plasma round, which deflected off our ship's nose. The medical transport seemed shaken by the contact, though it refused to turn back. The distance between them and *those things* was narrowing.

This was lunacy! What were those Gojid doctors thinking? I admired their commitment to saving lives, but they were setting up the exact scenario I feared.

"Abort!" I shrieked into the communicator, broadcasting the message on all frequencies this time. "Gojid medical vessel, turn back at once. The predators will destroy you."

There was no reply from the Gojid first responders. They were unarmed, which meant they stood no chance in combat. Worse, the

Terran ship might've heard my plea, and realized what an easy target they stumbled upon. I waited to see the doctors blasted to bits, feeling pity swell in my chest.

On the bright side, at least it would drill some sense into Rumi, and whoever else was swayed by him. The expressions around the bridge were finally the ones I recognized from our face-offs with the Arxur.

For some inexplicable reason, the human ship hesitated. Sensors suggested that their weapons were powering down, and they were altering their course to avoid a collision. I was certain my eyes deceived me, as the primates allowed the medical ship to pass their position.

"What about that, Captain? What could they possibly gain?" Rumi hissed.

I chewed at my claws, rattled to the core. Allowing a vessel to survive, that aimed to resuscitate enemy combatants, was in direct opposition to the predators' goals. Why would those abominations exhibit mercy? That was the exact brand of illogical softness we were mocked for, by the Arxur.

But accepting any explanation that mandated emotion was out of the question. There had to be an ulterior motive at play. There just had to be! Like I told the crew, the Federation condemned humanity by unanimous vote; they wouldn't make that decision lightly. Perhaps I wasn't looking at the big picture.

The humans need the Venlil for now. They can't afford to alienate their lone ally, when they're so behind technologically, I soothed myself. *Tarva must've sent someone to supervise, and so they managed to show restraint. They're biding their time.*

Alarm flashed through Rumi's body language, as he saw me struggling to formulate a response. The doctor rolled his eyes in disgust, and turned to address us all.

"They wanted to preserve ammunition, when they realized the ship wasn't a threat," Zarn answered for me. "Humans are pragmatic enough to override their sadism, when it comes to their own survival."

"Quite possible." I managed to keep my voice steady. The predators were doing an excellent job messing with my head, if nothing else.

“Whatever game the humans playing at, we know their true colors. We always have…and we always will.”

Chapter 18

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 5, 2136

The essential Terran dignitaries were present in the meeting hall, alongside the top-ranking Venlil staff. I settled down in the chair between Noah and Kam, which was turning into the typical seating arrangement. There was satisfaction in finding the predators' presence so… normal and routine.

The importance of this conference could not be understated. The UN was determining which parties to take action against in the Federation, and whether diplomatic avenues could prove a suitable alternative to violence. There was no reversing the war against the Gojids; the damage done to their repute by Sovlin was catastrophic. But perhaps not everyone had to get suckered into this shit show.

That was why I hoped Recel would show at the meeting. The Federation officer hadn't left his room since his arrival, and had barely picked at the meals we delivered by his door. My attempts to speak with him were met with a half-hearted 'Go away.' It was all I could do to inform him of the planned start time, and remind him once more on my way to the assembly hall.

In case the Kolshian did accept our invitation, we wanted to make him as comfortable as possible. The humans were wearing opaque visors to conceal their eyes, and surgical masks to obscure their menacing snarls. The UN personnel were quite accommodating; it would likely be standard procedure, for any future first contacts.

My eyes flickered over to Noah. Without the predatory features to buff up the humans, they looked squishy and weak. Those hands were more attuned to picking berries or climbing trees than combat, which was probably close to the truth. They lacked any form of camouflage for stealth, and weren't that quick. Even their smell and hearing were subpar.

What kind of predators are they? They always mention tools when asked, then change the subject, I thought. *Perhaps they're ashamed of their natural weakness?*

"I look ridiculous in this, Tarva. I'd prefer a full helmet, rather than

this cyborg doctor cosplay," Noah hissed.

I stifled a laugh. "I understood half of what you said. But this allows you to drink water, and I hope it's less stuffy. You must have been miserable on that first TV appearance."

"Oh, I think I was just trying to remember to breathe. You have no idea how in awe we were." The ambassador leaned back in his chair, and waved a hand for emphasis. "I realized how important that moment was. Sometimes, I still think to myself that I dreamed it all."

"It is like a fever dream, isn't it? It's all so strange. Oh, um, speaking of strange… there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Go on."

"We've noticed some unusual behavior from your human volunteers. Mildly concerning."

"Dear God, what have we done?"

"Just all sorts of bizarre reports, which I am increasingly baffled by. Multiple cases of humans speaking in high-pitched voices when asking Venlil to do things, or even saying hello."

"Oh, yeah…I can see that."

"Giving us toys that make ear-piercing squeaks when touched. Sometimes throwing objects and begging us to retrieve them? I don't understand the purpose."

"Hm, that would be demeaning…sorry about that."

"And you're so obsessed with our fur. Always trying to touch it, and talking about how soft it is. Some people suggested you wanted to harvest it."

Noah recoiled, and I figured his eyes were wide with horror. "Nothing like that. We just, er, like cute animals?"

"Why?"

"It sparks our nurturing instincts. Releases dopamine, which makes us happy."

"But you don't do any of that."

"You're a planetary leader, and I'm a terrifying beast to you. It'd be wholly inappropriate and unprofessional. Though I confess, as for

the last one…the thought has crossed my mind."

"You don't scare me anymore, Noah. But if you must, I'd prefer you try any fur-petting on Kam than me. I'd get a laugh seeing him bite your head off."

"Deal."

Kam glared at us, clearly eavesdropping on our conversation. "Don't even think about it! Tarva, it's going to be your fault if Noah loses a finger or two."

"Good thing I have ten of them." Noah stretched a hand in the military advisor's direction, and the Venlil jumped up from the table. The human brought his arm back to his chest with a laugh. "I'm kidding, Kam. I'd only do that if you asked me to."

Secretary-General Meier broke off his conversation with his generals. "Well, I see we're all wonderful at sitting still. Aren't we, Ambassador Williams?"

"Uh, we were just playing around," Noah replied.

"I see that. A lot of mature adults here." The UN leader heaved an exasperated sigh. I was no expert in human body language, but his posture screamed exhaustion. "Right, this meeting was supposed to start ten minutes ago…no sign of Recel. Let's get started."

I pulled up the briefing material on my holopad, and refreshed my memory one last time. The human generals had forwarded a proposition for a ground invasion of the Gojid home world. I'd given it a cursory review, in advance of this gathering, and discussed with my advisors what our role should be.

It was ironic, since I knew what those plans were derived from. They were offshoots of the original tactics we drew up together to invade the Arxur. Brandishing those ideas against our former allies, which were designed to raid sentient farm worlds, felt dirty.

There were some modifications, stressing the preservation of civilians where possible. I was surprised to see the humans adhering to their warfare rules, under the circumstances.

The stated objective was to capture government leaders, and to force the Gojidi Union's capitulation. I couldn't disagree that the only way to bring them to the negotiating table was at gunpoint. They'd amassed an annihilation force from the discovery of a single

human.

“I take it we’re all familiar with this operation. It’s an ambitious task, I know,” General Zhao stated.

General Jones tugged at her mask. “But ground fighting, and atmospheric warfare; that’s our territory. I’m confident in our chances.”

“The problem is which ships to use, for the battle above. To transport a proper amount of soldiers,” Zhao finished. “Candidly, our ships just don’t cut it, in any way.”

“You’ll use Venlil ships for whatever you need for now, and that’s final. We’ll give you our blueprints too, so you can build yourself a proper armada.” I glanced at Noah for support, and was relieved to see an encouraging nod. “With our knowledge in hand, I know you can make improvements on our designs. It will help us both in the long run. I don’t wish to keep anything from you anymore.”

“That’s very generous of you, Governor. Thank you,” Meier said. “We will repay—”

The door creaked open, which about made me jump out of my fur. A violet-skinned Kolshian slunk into the room, and surveyed the occupants with hesitancy. I was grateful the humans had kept their face coverings on. Even with the precautions, the Federation officer was trembling.

My ears perked up. “Recel! We didn’t think you were coming. Please, sit down.”

It was promising that he showed up, since he was the best hope of peace. Then again, he was a wild card. Recel could outright insult the humans, and inflame the situation. I don’t think the UN representatives, or for that matter, any Venlil present would take kindly to a defense of Sovlin’s actions either.

“I wasn’t sure I would come myself,” the Kolshian sighed. “But we must all live with the choices we make. Here I am.”

“It’s come to my attention that you find it hard to look at us.” Secretary-General Meier gestured to his facial attire. “We’ve elected to wear these visors, so that you don’t feel that we’re staring at you. Does that help?”

Recel waved his tail. “Yes. Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*. You have the sincere gratitude of our planet, for your heroism and compassion. Knowing your feelings toward predators, I suspect you will decline my offer. But we are more than willing to grant you asylum on Earth, should you so desire.”

“I appreciate the offer. You diverge from the Arxur in many ways, that I have seen. But I don’t think I could ever live among you.”

“We understand. If you truly cannot abide our looks—I mean, it’s hurtful, but not unexpected.”

Meier’s words about the sting of the galaxy’s cold-shouldered treatment rang true. My mind flickered back to how wounded Noah looked, when he learned that the Venlil planned to kill humanity. The crestfallen look on his face when I described my initial impression of him to Recel.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been quite so honest, even if it soothed the first officer. The human played it off as a joke, but I suspect he did need some kind words on occasion.

It must be awful to be shunned as a monster constantly; to feel rejected and unwanted. To have every action under a microscope. Noah had been dealing with Venlil gawking or panicking at the sight of him for months. Did he understand that I cared for him, despite my instincts?

I patted Noah on the hand absent-mindedly, and he squeezed my paw in return.

Recel drew a deep breath. “Alright. W-what else do you want of me?”

“Co-existence is all we ask, from anyone,” Meier replied. “I don’t know how to achieve that from a Federation that seeks to genocide humanity. I’d like your opinion, because my own outlook is quite bleak.”

“Some in the Federation may be open to hearing your case, if they can get past the…you know. I’ve had a lot of time to think, and I believe human history may have been studied through a narrow lens. It’s so ingrained that predators are inherently evil. We might’ve overlooked the forest for the trees.”

“And where does that leave us? I don’t think the Gojids are the only ones plotting an attack in the Federation. If you have any ideas for a peaceful resolution, I’m all ears, but we intend to defend Earth to

the last."

The Kolshian's demeanor shifted in an instant, and suddenly, an authoritative officer was present. "You can start by releasing the hostages. Now. Peaceful species don't hold diplomats and civilians against their will."

"That was my doing, Recel," I chimed in. "After what happened with Marcel, you can see why I thought it necessary."

"But I agree with him, Tarva. It reflects poorly on humanity, because, regardless of the truth, everyone will fault us in that matter. The Federation must be worried for their citizens' condition." Meier tapped his fingers on the table, deep in thought. "It will help our case for their own people to validate what has been said by the Venlil. We should allow anyone to leave that wishes to."

"News of our existence is out," Noah added. "The damage is already done. There's no reason to keep them here."

I flicked my ears. "Very well. I'll reopen the borders tonight…at least for outbound ships."

Recel's eyes widened in surprise. It was obvious the officer had been expecting resistance, rather than for the predators to side with him.

"Good. That's settled. Any other ideas, Recel?" Meier asked.

"Um, the Federation is holding a summit, a few days from now. They're going to discuss what to do regarding humanity. You could send a representative. Perhaps they would let you say a few words in your defense?"

"What's to stop the Federation from covering up anything we say? Any information we give them, or anything that contradicts their narrative? It sounds like your leadership has already made up their minds."

"The Federation aren't out to dupe their own citizens. They just can't have another Arxur. Everything will be broadcast, so even if the leadership won't budge, you could sway public opinion."

"But you hardly sound convinced that the Federation will let a human speak at all, Recel. What's to stop them from slapping a collar on our representative, and bashing their face in too? Or shooting them on sight?"

“Honestly? Nothing. I can’t predict how they’ll react. I would’ve thought we were better than that at one time, but I don’t anymore.”

“I couldn’t send anyone to that fate. It would be akin to murder.”

I swished my tail in agreement. After watching a human pilot, brutalized at the hands of a Federation crew, the risks were fresh in everyone’s memory. It was a senseless sacrifice, that could be for nothing; the Federation would be reluctant to let a predator voice its thoughts. Recel knew better than anyone how deep-seated their hatred ran.

“I’ll go,” Noah said.

My pupils snapped toward him. “Absolutely not! I don’t want to see you killed, or maimed as a lab rat.”

“I’m not afraid of dying. If there is a single species like the Venlil out there, I find it a worthy cause.” The ambassador gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulder, then turned his head toward Meier. “All I ask is for a cyanide capsule. I don’t know if I could bear torture. I want a way out, if it comes to that.”

The Secretary-General hesitated. “Are you sure? I couldn’t tell you, not with a straight face, that I believe you’ll come home.”

“Quite sure. And I’d like to leave as soon as possible. There’s no time to waste.”

Horror chilled my blood. The last person I wanted to fall into Federation custody was sweet, forgiving Noah. He was a godsend in the ambassadorial role; always with a perfect read on my emotions, and willing to answer every awkward question. I had come to think of him as one of my own advisors. Perhaps I was a bit too reliant on him to defuse tense situations.

“I’ll go with you, then,” I hissed. “I’ll try to protect you, though I don’t think I can do much. My standing with the Federation has diminished.”

“Tarva, no. What if they hurt you? They threw a Venlil in a cage with a starving predator, remember?”

“They won’t do that to me. I’m a planetary leader, and the galaxy will be watching. I am not worried for my safety.”

Recel lowered his eyes. “Please allow me to accompany you as well. I wish to turn myself in for high treason.”

“We don’t want you punished for helping us,” Meier said.

“I know. But my testimony may be helpful in balancing what Sovlin has told them. And I wish to be home, whatever happens. My heart lies with the Federation.”

“If that is really what you want, you’re not a prisoner.” Disappointment seeped into the UN leader’s tone. “I do wish you would reconsider though.”

“I won’t.”

“Very well. Good luck to all of you then.”

Noah stood up from his chair, and extended his hand to the Secretary-General. Meier tugged at it, in that quirky, grappling ritual humans did. It felt like a final good-bye, though I hoped that wasn’t the case.

I wondered what the gentle ambassador could say that would dissuade the Federation. He needed to challenge hundreds of years of research, and flip assumptions, without getting killed.

It was a tall task, even for a man who epitomized the best of humanity.

Chapter 19

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 10, 2136

Two patrol ships rushed to intercept our transport the second we crossed the Zurulian border. There was none of the warmth in their greeting that I craved.

I hoped that dodging Gojid territory would lower the temperature of any interactions, but word traveled quickly. Our neighbors possessed a keen awareness that the Venlil had thrown in our lot with predators. We were guilty by association now. I assured the Zurulians of my diplomatic intent, and decided not to mention the human's presence until we reached our destination.

After several back-and-forth conversations, the guards received permission to escort us to the summit. I suspect they wouldn't have allowed it if they knew a human and a traitor were the other two passengers. The Federation chaperones were diligent, tailing us through subspace for the duration of the days-long trip.

I still don't know how I'm going to convince them to let a predator play politics. Maybe I should just wing it?

Our transport was midway through its descent now, plunging through the host planet's atmosphere. It was apparent what Recel meant by returning home. The Kolshian home world, Aafa (a name that translates to 'garden'), was hosting the convention in its capital. It would require great care not to incite a stampede, with the crowd I anticipated.

Millions of residents dwelled among artistic buildings and botanical wonders; the renowned School of the Flora meant Aafa had a large student population. There would be ample spectators at the governing hall, since such sessions were open to the public. If a predator was reported on the loose, the premises might be vacated or locked down.

I wondered if the nearest civilians would be rushed to bunkers, the way I had done when the humans approached my planet. It seemed silly, in retrospect: sending out a planetary distress signal over a two-person vessel. Someday, I was going to tell Noah that I

intended to surrender Venlil Prime to him. The Terran ambassador would have a hearty laugh at my expense.

“This is Governor Tarva. I reiterate my request to speak to the presiding chieftain immediately. It is urgent!” I transmitted, for the fourth time.

My designated strategy was to hail the Federation over the media channels, so that if anything went wrong, the public could hold them accountable. Recel was sandwiched beside me, in order to appear on our video feed. The Kolshian officer couldn’t stop yawning; his orange eyes were bleary from sleep-deprivation. I was amazed he hadn’t nodded off from exhaustion, regardless of his instincts.

Noah was preoccupied editing the first contact materials the UN had thrown together. The predator seemed uncharacteristically nervous. I knew he wanted to paint a rosy picture of humanity, and to include anything that might help their cause.

Wasn’t he displaying that ‘closed body language’ he explained to me long ago? Maybe I was projecting my feelings onto him, since I was terrified about what would happen to him next.

“He’s signing on now. Please, be patient,” came the monotone reply. “Your favor here is strained as things are, Governor.”

I was aware of the fact that our ship was target-locked; that wasn’t exactly standard procedure for an approaching diplomat. A large security force was present to ward off any Arxur attacks, in case they got a whiff of the convention’s location. The Federation couldn’t afford to have every galactic leader killed in a decapitation strike.

We’re not part of the Federation anymore, are we? I realized, with a pang of sorrow. *The Venlil are public enemy number one. I’m probably going to be offering our withdrawal today…if they don’t kick us out first.*

The Terran ambassador clapped his hands together, in what I believed was satisfaction, and jolted me out of my thoughts. Recel whined at the unexpected movement, and the human dipped his head in an apology.

“All set, Tarva,” Noah whispered. “Send it over.”

I tapped a button on my holopad, uploading the data cache to the

local internet. The compilation documented everything that had transpired since first contact. It also went over humanity's surprising ability to form attachments, and the cultural nuances the Federation overlooked in past research. That was the narrative I wanted to circulate.

I shared the file wherever I thought it could get traction; social media, discussion boards, and private messages to reporters. With any luck, a few figures in the media would pick it up and ignite a public discourse. Even if they were laughing at the notion, it would introduce viewers to the idea of a friendly predator.

"You!" A Kolshian with indigo coloration appeared on screen, and I recognized him as the senior Chief Nikonus. A scowl marred his features as he spotted the officer beside me. "We heard what you did, Recel. Shooting your own captain, and releasing a predator?"

"There were extenuating circumstances. Recel is remanding himself to your custody," I said.

Nikonus squinted at the video feed. "You look terrible. The guilt must be eating you alive."

The treasonous officer pawed at his eyes. "No…I just can't sleep a wink trapped with this creature. It's not his fault…he covered his eyes for the entire ride, he's tried staying out of sight…but knowing that he's present…"

"Creature? What is Recel babbling about, Tarva?" the Kolshian leader growled.

"Don't freak out, okay? Please." I turned the camera toward the masked predator, who flailed his hand in front of him. "There is Noah; the third and final passenger on our ship. He wants to speak to all of you."

Chief Nikonus' eyes bulged. "Is that…"

"A human. Yes."

"Why would you bring a predator here? Are you trying to set it loose on us?!"

"All we want is to talk. You're about to attack his planet. Shouldn't you hear from this supposedly evil species first, before you make a permanent decision? Doesn't he have a right to defend himself?"

"Absolutely not. If you weren't on that vessel, Governor, I'd order it

shot down!”

There was no hesitation from the Kolshian host, which wasn’t a promising sign. Would Nikonus even allow our ship to land at all? What would deter them from gunning Noah down, the second he set foot in the station?

“You permitted us entry, before you knew of the human’s presence,” I pleaded. “Do the Venlil have a right to address the galaxy?”

The Chief flared his nostrils. “You have a right to speak, and to state your version of events on record. You’re still a member of the Federation… at least, for now.”

“Well, I wish for Noah to speak in my stead, and to be treated with the same rights as a Venlil citizen. Look in my eyes. I consider him one of my own.”

“You have snapped, Tarva! There’s millions of people down here, who don’t want that thing to set foot in our capital. Some of us still value our lives.”

“It’s one predator versus all of you. You have him well outnumbered.”

“I can’t let a dangerous beast into the governing chamber. What’s to stop it from eating the nearest leader on television? To stand and gloat about the taste of our children’s blood?”

“He won’t.”

“But what if it does?”

“Then you’ll have documentation of what humanity was like, when the Federation is asked by future generations why we made this decision,” Recel interjected. “But I’m telling you, these predators are more civilized than they look.”

“Please, Nikonus. Let Noah say what he’s come here to say. You don’t want people to think you have something to hide, do you? What harm can a few words do?”

“Ugh. It can speak for five minutes, and not a second longer. If it so much as stares at anyone the wrong way or stumbles in its footing, it will be shot.” The Kolshian chief waved a tentacle assertively. “Nor will I pledge for its safety after that time frame, even if it complies. Understand?”

Five minutes was hardly enough to break the ice, let alone cover everything in humanity's arsenal. It was a farce of a trial to appease the Venlil; after which, the Federation could rush to a summary judgment. Noah's body language betrayed little emotion, but he gave me a nod to signal his acceptance of the terms.

I flicked my ears with forced politeness. "We accept. And if you're interested in objectivity, parse through the data dump. That goes to anyone listening. I've uploaded it to social media under my credentials, explaining what we've learned since first contact."

"You're pushing your luck, Tarva. I have a lot of preparations to make. Do not disembark until my next transmission."

The Kolshian presider cut off the call, uninterested in waiting for my acknowledgement. That could've gone better…but it also could've gone much worse. Recel collapsed into the nearest seat, while I turned back to the pilot's console. We were moments away from arrival, and had just cleared the spaceport overhang.

The ship touched down under my supervision, slipping its tendrils into the docking port. A thud hummed through the walls, and the engine commenced its cooldown process. I breathed a sigh of relief. The Kolshians allowed us to complete our landing sequence, which was half of the challenge.

The terminal was adjoined to the governance hall, similar to the reception lawn we had on Venlil Prime. I was pleased to see media personnel and cameras, all trying to catch a glimpse of the predator diplomat. Non-essentials hadn't been evacuated; not yet, anyway. My play, to talk where everyone could hear us, had paid off.

The more eyes on this whole debacle, the better.

Noah peeked through the window. Knowing him, the ambassador was itching to survey the alien scenery. A red dot appeared on his forehead, and I screamed at him to get down. The predator dropped to the floor with lightning-quick reflexes.

The human removed his mask for a moment, clearly short of breath. Those binocular eyes must be lost in a thousand-yard stare beneath that visor; he laid on the floor in silence for several minutes. I think he was worried if he stood up, the Federation was going to kill him. A trigger-happy shooter could take him out in a heartbeat.

Recel studied the predator, as he held his head in his hands.

“What are you thinking, human?” the disgraced officer asked.

Noah snorted. “I’m wondering how the Arxur were ever uplifted, when it’s obvious your hatred for predators is so strong.”

“Things would’ve been different for humanity if you were the first ones we found. We uplifted dozens of species before them, without issue,” Recel explained. “We wanted to accept all sentients.”

“But all the research you did suggested the Arxur were different. Did prey species fight wars, Recel?”

“Not in the way you do. Our wars were over limited resources; for survival, when there wasn’t enough to go around. It wasn’t about power, ideology, or bloodshed. That’s why we thought we could fix the grays.”

I pinned my ears against my head. “We were naïve and stupid, but I miss the species we were then. Maybe we deserved what happened to us, because of our weakness.”

“Of course not! I just don’t understand how they took on you all at once.” Noah pursed his lips, and dragged himself back to a sitting position. “Even with your help, there’s no way we could steamroll the entire galaxy.”

Recel stifled a yawn. “We had nothing to defend ourselves with then. The only survivors from that sector of space are the species that ran. We didn’t understand what was happening.”

“But why didn’t you have any defenses?” the predator asked. “You never even considered the possibility of being attacked? No preparation or contingency?”

“You don’t understand, because you’ve never known peace. Why would you have planetary defenses when all sapients get along, as a rule? Why would you have warships if you never intended to use them? Humans had a… very different experience on your world.”

I swiveled my ears down, and allowed their conversation to float into the background. The last thing I wanted at a time like this was to discuss a topic as grim as war, especially when I’m sure Noah had stories that could traumatize me. There was no harm in closing my eyes, just for a few seconds…

The world fizzled away, and my mind dissolved into the dark ocean of slumber.

“Tarva, wake up.” Noah’s visor was inches away from my face; I almost headbutted him when I jerked upright. “The Kolshians told us we can leave the ship. It’s time.”

It appeared that Recel had already fled from the craft, which didn’t surprise me. If I was a betting woman, I’d wager he was thrilled to be out in fresh air. Back on his own turf, even though it spelled catastrophe for him. The Kolshian officer didn’t want to be confined with a human any longer than necessary.

I wonder what will happen to Recel. He’s going to have several counts of treason stacked against him, I mused. *The Kolshians could hang him ten times over, if they want to.*

The human hoisted me to my paws, and half-carried me over to the exit hatch. I leaned on him even after I regained my bearings, reluctant to let go. There was no telling what the Federation would do when we disembarked this ship; we knew for a fact that there were gunmen on standby.

We climbed down to the octagonal terminal together, and I struggled to read my surroundings. Dazzling lights were pointed straight at us, likely intended to blind the predator. Noah winced, and brought a hand toward his eyes to soften the blow. The human must be grateful to have the tinted visor to shield his vision.

I turned my head to the side, so that the glare wasn’t head-on. Kolshian soldiers were wrapping a trembling Recel in chains, and stuffed a gag in his mouth. One of the guards whipped him on the chin with a nightstick. They seemed to feel more vitriol toward him than the human.

“Oops,” the guard jeered. “My bad.”

The officer whimpered, but didn’t fight back against his captors. A pang of concern stabbed at my chest, as they dragged the violet-skinned Kolshian away. Then again, I suppose I should be more worried for Noah’s safety now. Recel still had time to assemble a proper defense, whereas the predator could be dead at a moment’s notice.

A Kolshian female raised a megaphone. “Human, take slow steps forward. Walk until we tell you to turn.”

The human crept forward in shuffling steps; it was obvious he was unsure of his footing. My guess was his eyes were shut all together.

I curled my tail around Noah's wrist, and steered him forward. His pulse raced; I could detect the hammering heartbeat through my fluffy tail. The camera lens' zeroed in on me, no doubt stupefied that I would incite contact with such a creature.

The fact that Noah's eyes were hidden probably helped our hosts keep their claws off the trigger. The soldiers directed us down a series of hallways, and I tried to look as relaxed as possible. The onlookers would attribute any fear to my proximity to the human. Optics were everything, at this point.

I wondered how the leaders would react, when we reached the governing chamber. The announcement of a human's arrival must've come as a shock; that wasn't what they imagined when they planned this visit. It was one thing to talk about a predator in the abstract, but another to see a waking nightmare in person.

The Terran ambassador better have a damn good speech at the ready. Somehow, I didn't think the Federation gentry would welcome him with open arms.

Chapter 20

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 10, 2136

The human ambassador strode up to the microphone, and scanned the cavernous auditorium. Every guard on the premises was flocked a safe distance away from the predator, with rifles trained at his head. Barricades and barbed wire stretched in front of the podium.

“Hello, leaders and citizens of the Federation. My name is Noah, and I come seeking peace on behalf of humanity.”

Silence reigned supreme over the chamber, and the human’s words hung in the air with an echo. The seats in the front row were vacated entirely; many of their occupants were sharing stations with the species near the rear wall. Others were pacing by the exits, and a few were absent altogether. Remote viewing must have seemed the best option.

“I am sure all of you have heard terrible things about my species. Perhaps some of them are even true. Predators ravaged your worlds and twisted your altruism, and you fear that we bear such intentions.” Noah turned his head toward me, and I flicked my ears in support. “But your conclusions are a product of confirmation bias; selecting only evidence that confirms your pre-existing beliefs. Humanity is not the same as the Arxur.”

The reporters in the upper decks were filming every word. Commentators spoke in soundproofed booths, offering live opinions on some of the most influential political shows in the galaxy. The public viewing balcony was almost empty, so most of the citizenry would witness this display secondhand.

The anxious murmurs rippling around showed this wasn’t what anyone was expecting. They were expecting the human to come here, brandishing mocking footage and lobbying threats. It was clear they were concerned how close I was standing to Noah; a few tried to signal ‘Run’ to me with tail language.

“You come in here, wearing a mask, and think that hides what you are?” Jerulim, the Krakotl ambassador, leapt out of his seat in outrage. His feathers were puffed out behind him in a semi-circle.

“You’re a slaughtering lot of slavers! You round up and gas children!”

The nearest dignitaries glanced at the avian, and signaled their agreement with tail-waves and ear flicks. It seemed to embolden others to vocalize their opinions.

“Wars where *millions* die are a regular thing on your planet,” Darq, the Farsul high elder, joined in. Her thin ears drooped with horror. “You use weapons that maximize suffering and destruction. You invade your neighbors and bomb cities; just like the grays.”

Noah raised his hands placatingly. “We have inflicted grave suffering upon ourselves, and I admit we have self-destructive tendencies. But as the Venlil can attest, there is another side to humanity. The side of us that is protective and familial, and has *always* reached to the stars in earnest. We have the traits of both predators and prey.”

“Yeah, sure. Like what? Mortality? Breathing?” Jerulim jeered.

“Let’s start with the forward-facing eyes, which seem to be the focal point of your disgust.” The human was unfazed by the widespread contempt, keeping his voice level. “They evolved for depth perception, since primates are an arboreal class of mammals. They have nothing to do with hunting, and—”

“Just happens to help with tracking and killing living creatures too, doesn’t it? Funny!” Mazic President Cupo interrupted.

“Well—”

“Which ones of us look tasty to your ‘arboreal’ eyes?” an unidentifiable voice asked.

A cacophony of similar-minded leaders spoke up. Animosity and fear were two words that captured the collective mindset to a tee. The shouts ranged from panicked, to accusatory, to blood-seeking. The Kolshian guards stiffened as the meeting dissolved into chaos; no doubt they expected the discordance to elicit a violent response from the predator.

“You’re just here to terrorize us! To scope out your enemies.”

“You kidnapped our civilians! Your first action as a space-faring species was to hold innocents against their will.”

“Flesh-eating filth. You defile this chamber with your presence.”

“Why did you assault the Gojids in cold blood?”

“We should execute this beast. I’d like to see its head roll!”

My eyes widened in dismay, and Noah ducked his head. This was a beatdown televised to the galaxy; not any genuine attempt at listening. It was only solidifying the viewers’ prejudices, hearing their leaders trounce any attempts for the predator to speak. I noticed a few dignitaries seemed interested in what the human was saying though, which was a glimmer of hope.

“SILENCE! I said we would let it speak, and I don’t break my word. Can you not hold your tongues for a few minutes?” Chief Nikonus roared.

Noah took a deep breath to collect himself. “Thank you. Unlike the Arxur, humans are omnivores. That means our diet is primarily plants. Plants, vegetation, you hear me? We are capable of subsisting without meat, and some of us choose to do so.”

“But you eat flesh?” Jerulim called from the crowd, ignoring the chairman’s glare. “Yes, you personally.”

“Er, yes. No animal has to die, thanks to science. We grow our meat from cell samples in a lab,” the predator added quickly. “Does that not overrule the moral dilemma? Of killing another creature? There is no suffering caused. We’ve done our best within the confines of our nutritional needs.”

The representatives bore squeamish expressions. While the ethical argument was correct, the mental image that answer evoked was unsettling. They were probably visualizing an unmasked Noah, stooped over a maggot-ridden corpse, with blood dripping down his chin. How could they take the person talking seriously with that thought?

Humans seemed to understand the reaction when we asked how they would feel, if they knew someone chowed down on human legs. It wouldn’t matter whether they were “ethically sourced.” The idea of consuming animal parts was utterly reprehensible to most species. I respected the Terran’s honesty, but that wasn’t earning him any brownie points with the Federation.

Even when I thought about Noah, munching into some artificial animal carcass, it made me shudder. I was happy he didn’t do it in front of me, but I still preferred not to think about it. There was a

crevasse of my mind that wondered if humans would find Venlil tasty. Did that craving really make the lovable ambassador salivate?

Nikonus retched into the wastebin under his station. “Growing flesh in a vat? Let’s change the subject… please.”

“Gladly. I don’t have time to go over everything on the data cache Tarva shared with you all in detail, as I hoped,” the predator stated. “But we’ve included our art, music, relationships, philosophy, culture, architecture, and scientific achievements. You may find beauty in our creation and innovation.”

I finally found my voice. “The experiments conducted by the Venlil, which proved humans have a wide-range of softer emotions, have been uploaded as well. Your scientists are welcome to review those findings; and I promise, they are replicable, if you wish to see for yourselves.”

“Ultimately, this is about you, not us. Do you want to kill a race of thinking, feeling people, because they are predators? Just because they have a violent history, and a few biological traits you curl your noses at? Is that reason enough to—”

Jerulim tossed his sunset-colored beak. “YES!”

“If cruelty and violence are reason enough to genocide a species, we should kill all of you.” Noah had synced his holopad to the auditorium projector, and cast a video to it. “You want to wipe out humanity without ever hearing us out; with no remorse. How would you respond in our position? What choice are you giving us?”

A handheld video of a young predator appeared on screen. I winced as recognition dawned on me, and I realized where Noah was taking this.

Marcel was holding a light-pink baby prey creature in one arm, feeding it milk with a bottle. The infant suckled eagerly, while the human supported its tiny front legs with gentle fingers. The leaders’ expressions softened at the cute animal, though they seemed worried about the predator dropping the ruse and gobbling it up.

“This is Marcel. He volunteers to care for animals in his spare time. Before we learned about the Arxur, he wanted to go to veterinary school. He’s never consumed meat in his life.”

Noah swiped a button. The footage switched to a news reel, which captured Marcel as he was carted away for emergency care. The

prolific wounds presented a stark deterioration from the pristine condition he was in before. It was tough to tell this gaunt, ungroomed human was the same fellow. The red-haired primate looked like a wild predator plucked from the woods.

Gasps echoed around the room, and I was relieved to see some genuine pity. Many species averted their eyes. I don't believe even the ones who wanted humans dead could stomach the execution of such violence.

The entire galaxy is going to see this, once the tapes reach them. Noah is forcing them to feel empathy for a predator.

The film transitioned to close-ups of the bruises, the emaciated bones, and the neck burns beneath the asphyxiating collar. The haunting finale was a photo of Marcel unconscious in a hospital bed, with a sobbing Slanek at his side.

"This is what your captain did to an *herbivore* human. Sovlin starved him and laughed at his pain, while Marcel begged him to stop." The Terran ambassador's voice climbed with indignation, and he shook his head in disgust. "It was cruelty for cruelty's sake. How can you say you're any different than the Arxur? If that's not predatory behavior, I don't know what is."

"Wait, he's *not* our captain; he answers to Piri. We didn't tell Sovlin to do that. We had no idea he went that far," Nikonus growled.

"I want justice. I want a trial, by your laws or ours. Can you imagine if a human treated one of your people like that? What would you be saying about us?"

"It doesn't matter what you do. You need to die either way," Jerulim muttered. "The whole idea is that you don't have the chance to fuck us over. You're not like us."

"But who decides who lives or who dies? Who is 'like us'? What precedent are you setting? Perhaps there's an intelligent scavenger out there, who wouldn't hurt a fly." The human paused for effect, and raised a confident hand. "A predator, who only eats insects and small game? A territorial herbivore, who might lash out at you? Maybe just a tree-dwelling creature who gets targeted for their eyes."

Cupo flared his trunk. "T-this is ridiculous! Your whole argument is hypothetical."

“Yes. It’s the hypothetical, that maybe, just maybe, we *could* be your friends. That’s what I want you to consider.”

“How do we know you won’t turn on us?” the Mazic returned, a hint of fear seeping into his voice.

“You don’t. But you’re going to lose this war without our help, and adding us into the mix basically guarantees it. Even if you believe that chance is slim, humanity is your only chance at victory. Work with us to fight the Arxur, as we have offered from the start, or we can all die together. It is your choice.”

Thoughtful expressions cropped up across the chamber, as the logic of the human’s words sank in. Noah saved a compelling argument for last; appealing to reason where empathy could not prevail. Even if this whole thing was an elaborate ruse, it wouldn’t affect the war’s outcome to fall for it.

Nikonus tapped his microphone. “Alright. That’s enough, human.”

“Of course. I’d just like to mention—“

“No. I let you speak over your allotted time, since these fools kept interrupting you. You can’t say I’m being unfair.”

“Right. Thank you.”

The human stepped back from the podium, and seemed to be awaiting further instruction. Chief Nikonus’ prior words, about not vouching for his safety after the speech, rang in my ears. Would the Kolshian soldiers really shoot a diplomat in cold blood, after everything they witnessed?

“Exit the chamber with slow steps, and follow the trail of lights on the floor.” Nikonus spoke. “We’ve prepared living arrangements. I expect you, at least the human, to stay there indefinitely. I will retrieve you two when all parties have reached a decision.”

I hovered at Noah’s side as we walked out, and visible relief tugged at my features. The Terran ambassador spotted the emergency lights along the baseboards, and trudged away with quiet reservation. My mind was reeling as we scaled a narrow stairwell, but I was just grateful the human was alive.

The selected living arrangements were a full diplomatic suite, complete with plumbing and a kitchenette. Two trays of fruit mash, with an algae and grain garnish, waited on the bedstand. Noah’s

species needed more protein in their diet. However, I wasn't going to explain that when the Kolshians were serving him a gourmet meal, the same as everyone else. They could've starved him and tossed him in a dingy cell.

The human flung off his visor. After wearing it for days, the rough metal had left an indentation around his eyes. A deep sadness danced in his chocolate irises, and months of weariness bubbled to the surface.

"I'm trying so hard, Tarva. This was my dream," Noah muttered.

I placed a paw on his shoulder. "You were amazing!"

The predator sighed. "It didn't feel like that. It felt like nothing I said mattered."

"You're wrong," a new voice chimed in. "As with most things in life, the hate-infused rhetoric stems from a vocal minority. Idiots speak the loudest. Reasonable people tend to be the quiet ones."

The human's head snapped up, and his eyes locked on the Zurulian at the door. The Zurulians were a neighboring species to us and the Gojids. With their quadrupedal anatomy, shaggy brown fur and cub-like ears, they looked smaller than they were. I imagine the visitor triggered Noah's "cute" response, which made him all the more aware of his predatory visage.

The Terran ambassador practically fell over himself to scoop his visor off the floor. He pressed a hand to his face in the interim, peeking between his fingers in comical fashion.

Noah fumbled with his headgear, panicking. "Er, I apologize. I wasn't expecting company so soon."

"Don't be ridiculous. You don't have to apologize for your appearance. Leave the visor off, friend." The male Zurulian averted his eyes briefly, before continuing. "I'm Chauson, behavioral scientist with the Galactic Institute of Medicine. May I come in?"

"Yes, go ahead! Please do," Noah said.

"I've been speaking in our Prime Minister's ear, before you ever went on stage. He's my brother," the scientist explained. "Those Venlil experiments are irrefutable. You sympathize with our plight, and you take no joy in suffering. With that new evidence in mind, we're willing to change our position on humanity."

“You are? I’m thrilled to hear that someone can grasp the truth.”

“At long last. The Zurulian government expresses our desire to begin anew, and I only hope that doesn’t come too late. Would you like to open diplomatic relations?”

Noah’s eyes crinkled around the edges, which indicated that a smile was hidden beneath his mask. The Terran ambassador felt his mission was worthwhile, if he swayed a single species. That wondrous enthusiasm returned to his predatory gaze, as bright as the day we first met.

“Yes, we would like that, very much. More than you know. Humanity’s door is always open.”

Chapter 21

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: September 23, 2136

Thanks to the destruction of Gojid military outposts, human forces were able to waltz through their systems without challenge. Piri recalled all vessels to protect their cradle-world, which meant the attack on Earth was postponed. With their border detection systems and complex defense network offline, their only play was to hold their core planets.

The rambunctious behavior of the humans, on the transport ride to the Gojid homeworld, struck me as odd. Their vulgarity multiplied by an exponential factor, once we were among the regular soldiers; the outpost visitors never made such explicit or demeaning comments. Even Marcel made some quips to his counterparts that came across as downright cruel, but they just laughed it off.

I was beginning to realize that these predators may have toned themselves down, so as not to exacerbate our fears.

How can they mess around at a time like this? Don't they know what they're walking into?

My human was 'playing' some 'game' with his new friend, Tyler, which was difficult for me to spectate. As I observed, my buddy's on-screen avatar shot an enemy, while gunfire sound effects blared from the speakers. Marcel's laser-focused expression became gleeful, and his counterpart cursed.

The screen shifted to a replay, which showed the bullet penetrating the avatar's head from a side angle. The body dropped in slow motion, as though the game was glamorizing its demise. Why would the Terrans want to simulate murder and warfare, for fun? I hated seeing my friend conduct himself in a predatory manner. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

Come to think of it, the ruckus the predators were creating caused me discomfort, in general. I really wanted a hug, and for them to turn off that uncivilized game. However, I didn't want to embarrass my Terran friend by collapsing into his grip; that would put him in an uncomfortable position. According to my recent reading, human males were taught not to display emotion in public.

Marcel grinned as Tyler called him obscenities, and my ears drooped against my head. I was hyper-aware that I was the only Venlil on this ship. I felt neglected and…alone, in this awful cage.

We're less than an hour away from our destination, Slanek. You need to get yourself together.

I slipped away while the red-haired human was distracted, and locked myself into the lavatory. My snuffling echoed through the chamber, as full-throated sobs racked my body. Why couldn't I just be happy that my friend was improving?

It was idiotic to think that Marcel needed me. There were too many rowdy predators here, and I was just going to get in the way. Whatever bonding had occurred between us, my species was too emotional and sensitive. I could never be one of his kind; it was more enjoyable for him to hang with his own people.

Maybe my human was bored of me, now that the alien novelty had worn off. Had I been suffocating the redhead, when I shepherded his recovery? My sentimentality must be grating on his nerves.

All we were to the Terrans was a burden. They had to be gentle with Venlil, and couldn't be their true selves.

"Slanek." A rapping sound emanated on the frame, and Marcel's agitated voice trickled into my ears. Surprise tingled in my chest that he even noticed my departure. "Slanek, open the door."

"Go away," I growled.

Regret pulsed through my mind, instantly, but it was too late to take the words back. I didn't want to hurt him, or push him away. What if this was what Sara meant, when she warned me not to call him a monster? I needed to let him make new friends, if that was what helped his recovery; even if it meant replacing me.

"I can't do that." The human tugged at the sliding door, making the frame wobble. "Don't make me kick this down, ya big fluffer."

I blinked away the tears, and tried to collect myself. My claws hooked on the locking mechanism, and began to unclasp it. Marcel pushed his way inside the second it opened, and knelt beside me. His hazel gaze softened when he looked at me; judging by the irritation, my eyes were red and puffy.

"Are you okay? Did I do something wrong?" he whispered.

I shook my head. “No.”

“The video games bother you? You think it’s senseless and violent. Predatory?”

“Yeah. But that’s not why I’m crying…at least, I don’t think so.”

“So you’re homesick?”

“Not really. Ah, don’t worry about it. It’s stupid.”

The human crossed his arms, and raised his eyebrows. The unwavering look he gave me stated, *I’m not budging until you spill.*

A tear strayed down my cheek. “You’ve been different ever since we got on this ship, Marc. I feel like you don’t want me here.”

Marcel recoiled like he’d been slapped, and stared at me in silence. My heart sank; the soldier wasn’t denying it. The human finally shook his head and chuckled, a stubborn grin clinging to his face. How could even a predator find that amusing?

A snarl tugged at my lips. “Don’t laugh at me!”

“I *am* going to laugh at you, when you say something that fucking dumb,” he snorted.

“How is it dumb? It’s like you’ve lost all interest in talking to me, or doing anything together.”

“Slanek, you’ve been avoiding me with a ten-foot pole. You haven’t so much as wagged your tail at me, and it’s suddenly like any contact with me repulses you. So I’ve been keeping my distance, and trying to figure out what I did.”

“Huh? Don’t you want your…‘personal space?’ I read a lot of books on human psychology to prep for this trip. They said you have an aversion to close contact. I didn’t want to pester or embarrass you in front of the other guys.”

“We have a problem with other humans in our bubble. But you? You’re fine, because you’re cute. Look, anyone that objects to me cuddling you is probably the type of person that kicks puppies for fun. So they can fuck right off.”

A chuckle trilled from my throat. All the predatory stressors compounded my emotions, and it hadn’t even occurred to me that I was the one who withdrew. Marcel was only respecting what he saw as my wishes.

I squinted at him. “You’re having more fun with the other humans, though. You look so happy…and I want you to be…”

“I’m just trying to get to know the guys. We’re going to be fighting alongside of them. I don’t want everyone to treat me like some charity case, just because I’m…” Marcel trailed off, pointing to his pink scars. “That’s all I’m known for, Slanek. I don’t want that.”

“That doesn’t define you. Anyone who thinks it does can ‘fuck right off’, to use your phrase.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry if I made you feel excluded, buddy.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“All is forgiven. So, now that we’re good…can I pick you up?”

As soon as he saw my ears flick, Marcel scooped me up in his arms. I felt joyful as he carried me to the couch, unashamed of our bond. The predator switched off the gaming console, noticing my sigh of relief; I wasn’t sure I wanted to be in his grip while he was focused on simulated death.

“C’mon man! We had one more round,” Tyler protested.

“I felt sorry for you. Mercy rule.” Marcel scratched my forehead, and the other soldier smiled at me too. Somehow, the expression looked much more ferocious on his lips than my human’s. “Besides __”

Our room was plunged into darkness, as the lights snapped out in unison. The transport lurched beneath my paws, and the long-limbed humans reached for nearby furniture to steady themselves. Gojid orbital defenses must’ve nailed us, which meant we entered their orbit.

In the dim lighting, the predators’ faces were cloaked in shadow; it bore a striking resemblance to our prehistoric beasts, lurking in the night. The only thing I could see was the faint glint of Marcel’s eyes, and the rapid movement of his arms. He draped me over his shoulder, while terror numbed my mind.

I could hardly even squirm in his firm grip; not that my body was obeying my brain’s commands. I wanted to protest, but couldn’t manage anything more than squeaks of gibberish.

Slanek, don’t pass out like you did against the Arxur. You’re supposed to be watching out for Marc, I scolded myself. *Do you have to freeze,*

every time you're in imminent danger? How are you going to make it in a warzone?

Another tremor pounded the transport, and the overhead ceiling creaked. The shields buzzed from the impact's dispersal, but some of the damage trickled through. This Gojid barrage meant an early departure for Terran soldiers launching to the surface; the main vessel wasn't going to be able to get us as close as they wanted.

"I'm surprised the Gojids found us so soon," Tyler barked. "What about the ships we sent ahead as decoys? To draw their defenses away?"

I lowered my ears. "I'm sure they predicted your predatory tactics. Ruses and deceit…that's all you guys."

Marcel's fingers tightened around my stomach. "You don't have to make it sound nefarious, Slanek. Everything we do isn't predator this, predator that. We just want a tactical advantage."

"Well, you're a predator, whether you like it or not. I don't mean it to be unkind," I responded. "The Arxur are ambush predators too. We've been conditioned to expect them to use stealth, or lure us away."

Tyler snorted. "We're not ambush predators though. We're persi…"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" I gaped as Marcel jabbed a heel into the other human's boot, and caused Tyler's words to break off. "Don't you dare finish that sentence."

"Ow, shit. I'm sorry, man. I wasn't thinking."

"Wait, you're what?" I asked in a tentative voice. "Marcel, why did you stop him? You…you're s-scaring me, roaring like that."

My eyes had adjusted to the lighting enough to see my human gritting his teeth. I had been around the Terrans long enough to know that was no smile. It was too strained. He was terrified that immediate disclosure would freak me out.

What secret was Marcel hiding? Didn't humans *have* to be ambush predators, primarily? All of our scientists were certain that was their only viable hunting strategy. They were slow, and their brains were their only advantage.

"Do you trust me, Slanek?" he whispered.

I nuzzled his shoulder. "Yes."

Marcel turned into a hangar bay. “Do you think I’m an… abomination? Like Sovlin and Zarn did?”

“No. You know I don’t.”

“Well, I’d like to keep it that way. I’ll tell you, but not right now. Then, it can be our secret. Okay?”

“F-fine. But I’m not going to forget.”

My friend sighed, and scratched his fresh buzz-cut with frustration. I could tell from how his strides quickened that he didn’t want to convey that information at all. Something about this whole exchange unsettled me deep in my bones.

Wouldn’t any explanation of humanity’s evolution be a good thing? In their position, I would want to put as many scientific questions to rest as I could. It would help galactic leaders make an informed decision about Terran society and inclinations.

Marcel set me on the floor, and slipped a bulky harness over his shoulders. I scrutinized his body language, trying to determine why he wouldn’t confide in me. If anything, not defaulting to ambush predation distanced humanity from the Arxur. What could be more heinous than stealth?

“Now, on the topic of trust,” the red-haired human began. “I’m going to strap you to my vest and sedate you. Everything will be alright, I promise.”

“What?” I scrambled backward, and collided tail-first with Tyler. “Why? You…don’t need to knock me out.”

Marcel cinched his vest straps. “You know we’re jumping out of a shuttle from the upper atmosphere. I don’t think you want to be awake for that.”

“W…you…wha…what? NO! I THOUGHT THAT WAS A JOKE!”

“We don’t joke about our crazy military shit,” Tyler chuckled.

My entire body quivered with dread, and my tail bunched up between my legs. Bile rose in my throat, a byproduct of the nausea racking my stomach. This was suicide!

Nobody in their right mind, or even the Arxur, would choose to freefall from the clouds. Tree-dwelling predators like the humans should have *some* fear of heights, or at least of slipping to their deaths.

Maybe that's what kind of predators they were? Leaping from great heights onto their prey?

"You won't remember any of it," Marcel insisted, creeping toward me. "You'll just go to sleep, and you'll wake up on the ground. Leaving you here is not an option, okay?"

The Terran ship pitched to the side, as it was pounded by another enemy assault. The shields rendered a negligible difference this time, and the thunderous jolt made my molars rattle. I squeezed my eyes shut, and tried to think.

My options were to go up in flames, or to enter a drug-induced state of helplessness, as a predator dragged me toward the ground. The only image in my mind was myself as a splat of blood on the pavement.

What if the sedative wore off before our deaths, and my last moments were hurtling through purple skies at terminal velocity?

I just couldn't do it, even for Marcel. I was going to tell the humans to leave me, and then figure out something else. As a Venlil, there was always the option for me to surrender myself. The Gojids would take me as a prisoner if I took a shuttle over there, alone…

There was a prick in my neck, and I yelped at the unexpected pain. My eyes blinked open to see Marcel stooped beside me, inserting a needle into my skin. The human already unloaded the entire syringe? With the tranquilizers flowing through my veins, I was going to be at the predators' mercy.

A scream of horror came from my throat. "NO! PLEASE, DON'T! Marc…"

My eyelids felt impossibly heavy, and my vision shrank to a pinhole. The last thing I remembered was collapsing into the human's arms, certain he was about to kill us both.

Chapter 22

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: September 23, 2136

I stirred to an array of screams, chaotic and unhinged; the perishing squeals of prey falling at a predator's claws. My ears keyed in to pounding pawsteps on the grass. Those were unmistakable thumps of animals running around in terror. Bullet spurts were also a constant, cropping up from both scattered Terran friendlies and lucid Gojids.

I'm alive, and I think I'm in one-piece. Hooray?

By the looks of it, the enemy were fleeing from a military base by the hundreds. It seemed to be a fifty-fifty split, which of the Gojids were fighting and which were on the run.

All the sentries and watchtowers, set up to counter a previous Arxur siege, were useless against an aerial drop. It was embarrassingly easy for the Terran forces to take control of the military institution, and continue to expand their perimeter. There was no organized response like the humans expected from a predominant Federation power.

No one accounted for predators falling from the sky, and landing smack dab in the middle of their fortresses. Many Gojid soldiers were in a panic; several had tossed their weapons aside, even as officers tried to restore order. A few individuals were lying prostrate on the ground. Others ran for seemingly unharmed ground vehicles, only to find the devious humans slashed their tires.

Anyone who fled to buildings for shelter was tracked by a Terran breach team. Predatory soldiers flushed their quarry out, adept in the art of clearing structures. Their arboreal roots only bolstered their mastery of ground warfare; there was no safe haven amidst their shocking incursion.

The Gojids at least had a chance against the Arxur. They could shoot down their shuttles, scout for their traps, and prepare for their advances, I thought. *This is something else. This degree of surprise factor will only work once.*

It was horrifying to look around at the enemy corpses littering the

premises. Many were riddled with bullets, mowed down without remorse by the ravenous Terran troopers. The ghastly sights, of organs perforating skin and blood pooling from agonized soldiers, sickened me to the core. Predators were simply everywhere, corralling their prey to perfection.

Was this really what humans practiced throughout their history? Was that disposition hard-wired into their DNA?

“Slanek, you’re awake!” Tyler’s voice came from behind me, making me jump. “Take it easy, at least until the drugs wear off. We’ll get you a pistol when you’re more alert.”

Panic seized at my heart. “Where is Marcel?!”

“Over there,” he replied, pointing.

Marcel was laying on his side with a communicator pressed to his face. A scoped rifle was tucked under his armpit, poised to pick off any Gojids attempting to return to the battle. The human found a group of enemy soldiers assembling out of his range, and watched with unblinking eyes. He barked out coordinates in a throaty snarl.

A small aircraft, which didn’t seem large enough to fit a pilot, descended over the enemy gathering. Its dimensions were minuscule enough to evade Gojid air defenses. I assumed it was… some sort of Terran murder robot?

Sure enough, kinetic fire rained down with incessant whirring, followed by a succinct missile explosion. Smoke accumulated in the air, as body parts, guts, and earth were dispelled from the epicenter. The humans didn’t want the enemy to have time to form ranks or generate a plan.

“This is their military?” Marcel muttered. “When we landed and their fellow soldiers started to be taken out around them…there was just mass panic. I don’t understand.”

“You’re seeing true fear. Everything becomes a free-for-all, and you lose your sense of self,” I growled. “Forget reason, or thought; you’re just drowning.”

The concept of a stampede was intuitive as blinking or breathing, to any decent-sized herbivore. In situations where bizarre and unanticipated threats took hold, it was easy to sink into a mindless daze. Feeling surrounded, races of notable intelligence were reduced to a herd of primitive animals.

Every instinct *demands* to run, but you don't know where to run to. One person races off in a direction, and pandemonium erupts. Everyone follows their lead, because they don't know what else to do. Individuals like me, with an inclination to freeze, often got trampled as collateral.

When I joined the Venlil Space Corps, a good chunk of our training was dedicated to overriding our flighty instincts. Virtual reality simulations of the Arxur, closing in on all sides, were common. A commander couldn't manage a total breakdown of military order, with soldiers fleeing the battlefield in droves.

The predators startling the young Gojid conscripts, and simultaneously closing off escape routes, set up the perfect scenario for a stampede. Honestly, that was where large herbivores were at their most dangerous. Raw instinct could encourage groups to plow through the threat. Humans concentrated fire on any Gojid clusters charging, causing them to turn away.

"I hope you can forgive me for dragging you out a spacecraft, against your will." Marcel pursed his lips. "It wasn't my first choice."

"I'm glad you're not hurt." My ears laid back against my head, unsettled by the notion. "That would've been awful, to wake up and find that out."

"Aw," Tyler purred, with a monstrous grin. "The Venlil are really sweet, aren't they? I kind of want one."

"Don't phrase it like that. Venlil are good companions, but they're not something you fucking own," my predator growled.

Despite their chatter, neither of the humans' eyes left the battlefield. A group of Gojid soldiers were hiding behind a large tree, a few hundred paces away. These hostiles retained their wits enough to shoot at any Terrans in the vicinity. Stray rounds impacted the hillock, whiskers shy of our position, and forced the predators to hunker down.

Marcel's breathing hitched, and his gun barrel swiveled in slight increments. Calling in the coordinates would waste precious seconds; the primate thought he could take the shot himself. One finger crept over the trigger, as a hint of a smirk tugged at his face. Was my friend enjoying this skirmish? Perhaps as much as those

“video games?”

There is another side to him, to all of humanity, that I didn’t appreciate. I’d be curious if we ran those famed brain experiments, right now. Their aggression is concerning. They look…hungry.

Tyler followed his partner’s lead, pressing his chin into the dirt. The blond-haired male lined up his own shot, and the two humans synced their motions. Ever the cooperative pack predators, they placed a pair of bullets through their targets’ heads in quick succession.

I recoiled in disgust as I saw how pleased the Terrans were with themselves. There shouldn’t be anything enjoyable about murder.

“Base air defenses are disabled and under UN control. Unit 13, proceed into the Gojid merchant settlement. We expect hostile reinforcements by nightfall.” A male voice on the other end of the radio crackled to life. “Commence occupation of the city, and establish a base of operations when the area is secure. Be advised civilians are fleeing en masse.”

My jaw almost dropped to the dirt. Why was the Terran commander advising his troops of the civilians fleeing? So they could pick them off or intercept them? Those were families vacating their homes with tiny children; terrified people who didn’t want to end up as a predator’s evening supper.

“Slanek, the CO said that so we use discretion which targets we shoot. It’s difficult to tell a fleeing civilian from an army coward right now.” Marcel grunted, without even turning his head. “Sometimes, I wonder what you think we are. The only civilians we want are political figures.”

I blinked in confusion. Did I say that out loud? I was certain I hadn’t. It was almost like the human could read my mind; my thoughts must be quite transparent. Most likely, the unnerved emotions had showed on my face. This warfare business left me shaken up, since it showcased the ruthless predator in them all.

“W-why are you invading the settlement then?” I stammered.

“Seizing this particular city will disrupt their supply chain. Forcing a surrender is what we want, without a long-term conflict. We can’t occupy every square inch of the planet. We have to be selective with our targets.”

The two humans dusted themselves off, and crawled back down the grassy knoll. My heartbeat raced as we packed in with the rest of their unit; many dilated eyes turned toward me with interest. In stark contrast to the vessels I served on, there was not a single soldier panicking or crying. There was an *unnatural* amount of composure and structure.

My mind wandered as we exited the north gate, trundling toward the walled settlement. Ground vehicles, which my human explained had been "airdropped" as well, served as an armored method to clear the path. It was a short ride to the city outskirts. There was so much carnage; I saw a handful of Terrans dragging an enemy away with a bag over their head.

"What are you doing with the surrendering Gojids? And the wounded ones?" I blurted.

"You see the people with the red cross band on their sleeves? Those are medics," Tyler explained. "If you get hurt by those spiky freaks, God forbid, go see them."

Marcel sighed. "Anyone who surrenders is being held as a prisoner. We're treating any human and Gojid soldiers still alive."

Our procession rolled to an unforeseen halt. Tree branches, barricades, and spike strips were laid out in a desperate attempt to obstruct the road. The Terrans disembarked their vehicles, and Marcel propped my paws around his neck to spare me from walking. My stomach lurched as I got a glimpse inside the settlement.

There were two routes out of the city, according to the maps Venlil intelligence provided. The main gate was large enough to fit three vehicles side-by-side; with tens of thousands of people trying to evacuate, it turned into a bottleneck.

Civilian corpses were splayed by the gates, and others were beaten badly enough to be immobilized. Many of the bodies were children, with skulls cracked open and limbs shattered to pieces. Half-conscious individuals staggered or crawled away from the approaching soldiers.

They were "fish in a barrel", as the Terrans say. Did the predators do this? Was Marcel lying about his commander's intent?

I realized as we drew closer that several of the cuts looked like

clawmarks, and that pawprints were stamped into the blood pools. This was the aftermath of a citywide stampede, not a predatory massacre. The inhabitants' desperation to escape, before the predators' arrival, was something I could only imagine. The humans, to their credit, didn't seem jubilant about the civilian casualties.

"Holy shit," Tyler breathed.

Marcel lowered his rifle. "What kind of parent leaves their child behind, Slanek? To bleed out in the streets."

I bowed my head in shame. "I thought you guys did that for a second. I'm sorry."

My human ignored me with a huff, and marched over to one of the Gojid children. She was crying for her mother, while tears poured down her face. Her leg was pulverized from prolonged trampling, and cuts laced across her body.

Marcel knelt beside the kid, removing his helmet with slow motions. "Hi, sweetie. I'm Marcel. What's your name?"

"D-don't eat me! HELP! MOMMY!" she sobbed.

"Nobody is going to hurt you." The human removed a Venlil plushy with oversized features from his duffel bag. He handed it to the child, a patient look in his eyes. "What's your name?"

I wasn't even going to ask why the primate was carrying that toy on his person. The Gojid toddler eyed it with suspicion, before hugging the soft fluff against her body. My presence, riding on the scary predator's back, might serve as a soothing factor as well.

"Nulia," she said with a sniffle. "My mom says you're bad people."

"That's a pretty name, Nulia. Parents are wrong about lots of things," Marcel replied.

Nulia whined in pain. "Where did you get those scars, Mawsle? You look mean."

"One of *your* officers tortured him because he looked scary," I growled. "Marcel has some nerve, to be born with forward-facing eyes. They threw him in a cage, electrocuted him, and—"

"Slanek! She's a child." The human drew an inhaler from his pack and passed it to Nulia. "Breathe this. It'll help with the pain."

“You were hurt just because your eyes are ugly?” She suckled on the canister, surveying the predator with earnestness. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

Marcel blinked, a far-off look in his gaze. “It’s not fair at all. Humans just want your leaders not to kill us. We’re here to stop them from destroying our homes and our loved ones.”

Other humans were tending to downed civilians as well, scrambling to set up a temporary medical tent. There was the side of the predators I was fond of: the empathetic nurturers. That wasn’t the typical flavor of an Arxur siege; no rogue soldiers were attempting to sample Gojid flesh, or salivating at the blood.

With the grays, the cost of surrender was always higher than fighting on. No matter how steep the penalties. If they saw Terran mercy, the Gojidi Union might be willing to admit defeat. The actual evidence suggested these predators were civilized, with rules and boundaries.

“So, if you don’t want to eat me…can you fix my leg?” Nulia asked.

My friend’s gaze lit up. “Yeah! We’ll try to find your parents after.”

The humans had no motive to help, yet their trained killers were falling over themselves to render life-saving aid. It was striking how their instinct led them to prioritize and coddle the children. If it was like this across the globe, the Terrans’ civilian policy would worm its way into the local broadcasts.

Wouldn’t it be ironic, if the tide of public opinion began to shift? Captain Sovlin must be having a coronary right about now.

Chapter 23

Memorytranscriptionsubject:*Slanek, VenlilSpaceCorps*

Date[standardizedhumantime]:September27,2136

Waves of Gojid reinforcements arrived after the predators' initial takeover. The humans' strategic advantage was that they could be liberal when hurling artillery into enemy ranks. Our opponents were more hesitant, bearing the knowledge that civilians were trapped within city limits.

To their credit, the Gojids adapted to the novel predatory tactics quickly. To counteract the unmanned UN ships, the fresh troops carried out manual surface-to-air missile launches. That made precision strikes a more challenging affair. From what I heard, most Gojid politicians escaped to an unknown bunker location, which meant the Terrans were also thwarted on their main objective.

The humans resolved to hold their perimeter, exacting a heavy price in blood for every inch they were forced to concede. They took up guard at positions with open sight-lines, and made Gojid advances suicide. With neither side able to make progress, the situation became a stand-off. Our rivals must be steaming at their failure to reclaim any significant landmarks.

"Slanek, you need to eat something. You haven't touched your plate. We're on next watch," Tyler mumbled through a mouthful of food.

The blond human was shoveling brown crumbles down his gullet, one after the other. This person, that I knew and traveled with, was consuming meat. Real, actual flesh bits, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world. No wonder Marcel had taken Nulia away for mealtime, and told me I should eat alone.

I didn't want to be impolite when Tyler asked if I wanted company. The thought hadn't even crossed my mind, that he would indulge in such a savage feast. My appetite vanished as soon as I saw him bite into those rations. There were so many animal pieces, contaminating the entire meal. The queasiness in my stomach was swelling upward, like a thrashing wave at high tide.

He'seatingtheburntskinandmuscleofadeadanimal.Crunchingitbetweenhisfangs.Fuc
I cursed internally.

Thispredatorisswallowingthosecarcassshavingswithouthesitation.He'senjoyingit,ev

Acid gurgled in my throat, and I spewed my stomach contents onto the ground. The human's blue eyes widened in alarm, and he rushed to my side. The flesh-eating beast patted my back, whispering soothing words. He dabbed a towel against my mouth, wiping off the vomit specks.

"It's okay, buddy," Tyler hummed. "I didn't realize you were sick."

How could this predator try to emulate normal behavior, after what he just did? All I could think was that he was a disgusting animal, and that he was probably breathing flesh particles onto my neck. It was all I could do not to kick my hindlegs into his carnivorous stomach.

I tried to spit the taste of puke out of my mouth. "I…want you to leave."

"Um, yeah, alright. Let me get Marcel first, and he can check on you."

I breathed a sigh of relief as the human exited the tent, and tried not to look at the meal remains he left behind. Most of these predators here ate meat, didn't they? It was a standard part of their diet; Marcel was the rare exception that refrained from such horrid consumption. I couldn't have the vegetarian back at my side fast enough.

My human returned with a sleeping Nulia tucked against his chest. The Gojid child had her leg fixed in a cast, and seemed to be in better spirits after a few days. Remarkably, her spines were laying flat on her back, despite being in a predator's clutches. Marcel rubbed the bristles, careless to the fact that they could extend and prickle him at any moment.

"Marc," I whined. "Please…"

His hazel eyes landed on the table. "What the fuck, man? You brought *predatorfood* around Slanek?"

Tyler glanced at his plate. "Oh…that's why he threw up? Shit, I'm sorry. Slanek, I'm real sorry, bro."

"Get the fuck out of here!" Marcel growled. "And for God's sake, take your shit-ass MRE with you."

The other human grabbed his food, and rushed away as my friend

shot him a blistering glare. The redhead cupped a hand over Nulia's eyes as she stirred, so she wouldn't see what Tyler had been munching on. I don't think I was ever going to be able to look at that meat-eating predator the same. That savage display made my skin crawl.

I lowered my ears. "I'm sorry for making you yell at your friend."

"Shh, it's okay, Slanek. Let's go outside and get some fresh air," Marcel said. "You'll feel better. Then, we'll clean up that mess. Everything is going to be fine."

My mind began to settle once we wandered out beneath the starlight. The red-haired human tickled Nulia's nose, making her giggle. It was clear he took a shine to the Gojid child, despite the feelings he harbored toward Sovlin and her species as a whole. I didn't understand how his brain operated sometimes.

"If you're happy and you know it, clap your paws." The human sang in a low voice, shooting a glance toward me. The kid squealed and slapped him on the chest, which I don't think was the instruction. "If you're happy—"

Two bright orange flashes detonated on the horizon, striking the most-populated regions of the settlement. Marcel's song died out as he observed the explosions, and my own eyes widened with horror. I thought the Terrans were opposed to an orbital bombardment!

Why had these predators gone through the trouble of an invasion, just to do that? Were they lashing out because they failed to capture their desired political targets?

More bombs fell close behind, striking points across the skyline, with the undeniable intention of scoring casualties. Aircraft ripped through the sky, dispersing a trail of interceptors to avoid being shot down. They were searching for a flat stretch of land on the city outskirts. Most likely, they wanted to touch down a shuttle and dispatch ground troops.

Thehumansdon'thaveaircraftlikethat,andtheydidn'tlandlikethat.Whichmeans…

"All Terran forces, report to your extraction point. The UN fleet is engaging Arxur hostiles above-world." Terse orders carried over the radio, confirming my worst suspicions. "But, they have already attained orbital supremacy. Their intent appears to be glassing the planet."

Any sign of weakness was the Arxur's invitation to pounce. The sadistic predators must've sensed that something was off from the destruction of the Gojid border outposts. As they advanced to the core systems, the lack of resistance from patrol ships or FTL disruptors confirmed those suspicions. The Terran incursion left this system vulnerable to the true threat.

Fear coursed through my veins, and the nausea began to simmer again. Facing the grays after this miserable, irredeemable week was a dreadful thought. I felt like I was about to snap as things were.

Meanwhile, the UN soldiers in the camp grabbed their weapons. They held no such reservations about drawing reptilian blood. I suspected fighting the Arxur was the reason most humans joined the Terran reserves.

"Not good. We have to evacuate as many people as we can," my human grumbled. "But, I'm just going to get you two out of here. You're all that matters to me."

Marcel withdrew his hand as Nulia's spines bristled, but didn't seem angered by the blood spots dotting his palm. He balanced the Gojid child in his arms, and knelt to let me climb onto his back. The weight proved difficult for him to handle. The predator grunted with exertion, shuffling forward in slow steps.

Thechild'slifecomesfirst,obviously.Wecan'tabandonhertoapredator'swhimslikeher

I disembarked. It was uncertain whether I could run more than a few minutes, or keep up with a human's long strides. But Nulia had no hope, if left to her own devices; with her maimed leg, she couldn't walk on her own.

Marcel knelt back down. "Slanek, no. I am not going anywhere without you. Listen… I can handle this."

"Take the kid. I'll be fine," I managed.

My slender legs trotted after the departing Terran soldiers, trusting that I could follow their footsteps. Two hands grabbed me from behind, and I yelped in alarm. My head snapped around, teeth bared with the intention to bite my assailant. There was a moment of hesitation as I realized it was Tyler; the very human Marcel just chased out of my tent.

A shudder rippled down my spine. The last thing I wanted was for this flesh-eater to stick his grubby paws on me. But it seemed to be

the best solution for Marcel's sake, so I decided to tolerate the unwanted contact.

My friend hesitated, seeing me squirm in discomfort. "You've got Slanek, Ty?"

"Yep. No man left behind. We all stick together," Tyler replied.

The blond predator shifted me onto his back, and he jogged off with Marcel close behind. The humans' breathing grew a bit more laborious, although I'd hardly call it panting. The predators ran for minutes without carving a dent into their stamina; there were merely a few beads of sweat on Tyler's neck. That was odd.

UN soldiers fanned out at the front of the entourage, on the lookout for threats. They were shepherding the vulnerable individuals behind them, rather than an "every man for himself" mentality. Terran medics were evacuating any wounded or captives that could stand, including their own hobbled soldiers. They had their fair share of human injuries to grapple with.

Some Gojid prisoners attempted to flee as soon as they were released. They appeared in decent shape, for having been in predatory custody. The humans made little attempt to stop them, watching them go with head shakes. The evacuation couldn't slow for fearful idiots unwilling to act in their own survival interest.

A decent percentage heeded the Terran warning about the Arxur threat, falling into the pack. Perhaps they felt indebted to the predators, since many were civilians who would be dead without human intervention. It was unsurprising to see that Marcel wasn't the only one carrying an alien child.

"MAWZY!" Nulia wailed. "Where are we going?"

"We're going somewhere safe, darling," Marcel panted, accepting the nickname. I think if I tried to call him that, his reaction would be quite different. "I need you to be brave. Think of it as a great adventure! Nothing can happen to you when you're with me, okay?"

I watched my human from my perch on Tyler's back. There was nothing adventurous about fleeing from an orbital raid. It was possible that nobody would make it off-world alive. A bomb could land atop the group right now and disintegrate us.

More Arxur craft descended through the atmosphere, eager to

collect dazed survivors as slaves. Pummel the cities across the globe, fill a few transports with cattle, and then finish off the rest. This was a story I'd seen before.

"Why did so many of the Arxur shuttles get through, when ours couldn't?" I whispered, more to myself than anything.

Tyler sighed. "We…we did take control of the Gojid defenses. And we haven't learned how to use them."

My ears curled back, as an explosion rocked the city wall a kilometer away. I was relieved we had escaped the confines with such swiftness; a few minutes slower and we would be toast. The humans carved a path through the local orchards, which took up much of the land outside the settlement. Grain fields rested past rows of plump trees, and I figured Terran craft would crunch down atop the stalks.

Atleastwecanlandshipsnow.Thesoonerwe'reoffthisforsakenworld,thebetter, I thought.
Ican'timaginehowtheGojidsfeel,knowingtheirhomeworldisallbutlost.TheTerransmu

Agitated chatter spawned at the head of the pack, and the humans slowed their pace. My gaze locked onto the galaxy's apex predators, who were spread out in search of lone civilians. I had never seen one of the Arxur in person. It was merciful that we spotted them first, but they still stood between us and our presumed extraction point.

Their tough gray skin was taut and scaly, forming ridges along their spines. Their long v-shaped snouts were perfect for snapping up prey; serrated fangs jutted from their mouths, even when they were closed. Onyx eyes were dialed to slits, and tracked prey with jittery motions. Their bipedal plodding allowed them to lunge forward with unbelievable speed.

My eyes zeroed in on an Arxur soldier, tearing into an elderly Gojid's stomach. The poor guy was still alive, and his screams were audible from here. Younger specimen were being dragged away, to serve breeding purposes or toil as slaves.

"Monsters," Nulia cried. "Way scarier than Mawsle. I want to go home!"

Marcel covered her eyes. "Don't look, Nulia. We have to escape from the monsters. They…destroyed your home."

“FIX IT!” she sobbed. “Fix it now!”

“I can’t. I wish I could.”

The Terran soldiers leading the posse crept forward, and waved for the group to continue. The Arxur’s nostrils flared as we drew within scent range. Something flashed in their eyes as they locked onto the humans. Was that…interest? Did they recognize the puny primates as predators?

UN forces opened fire on the grays, and tried to seek refuge behind the orchard trees. They were drawing the reptilians’ attention to provide cover for our escape. We darted out into the open, and I prayed that the vessels circling overhead were friendlies. As if on cue, three ships with the Terran insignia alighted on the grain field.

Our human protectors were locked in a vicious firefight, at the edge of my periphery. A few of them were strewn out in lifeless positions. The time they bought us was a mere thirty seconds; we needed to be off the ground as soon as possible. The Arxur had wizened up to the diversion, and lobbed their shots at the civilian entourage.

ItistimeslikethesеIwishIhadthehumans’narrowfieldofvision.Icanseealloftheterrorar

Tyler pushed himself to his maximum speed, and dove into the open side door of a transport. I dropped to the floor and crawled toward the rear of the aircraft. The blond human asked if I was okay, repeating my name several times, but I ignored him.

My gaze was focused on the entrance, watching as several passengers climbed in. Dozens of people pushed into the craft, packing in on each other. The Gojids were eyeing any boarding predators warily, but after what they saw outside, they realized the humans had better self-control.

Wait…where was my friend? The engine revved to life, and I screamed at the pilots to stop. Oblivious to any inherent danger, I raced toward a window.

Marcel was shouldering a wounded human alongside a medic, while still clinging to the kid. Bullets sailed around him, but he refused to abandon his compatriot. He hoisted the half-conscious predator into the vehicle, then staggered onboard with the doctor.

My human collapsed on the floor, groaning. The expression on his face spoke of pain, and I hoped it was just exhaustion. I dashed to

his side, and whimpered at the sight of crimson blood pooling around him.

“Mawsle, your arm is wet,” Nulia said. “And sticky.”

“Is it now?” he murmured. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure…sure it’s fine.”

There was another red mark on his thigh. My predator appeared to have been shot *twice* during the fray. Why did Marcel insist on playing the hero, every time the Arxur turned up?

These wounds hit non-vital areas at least, from what I knew about human anatomy. As long as the bleeding was stopped, he should survive. The spacecraft began to lift off, and I shouted for a medic.

The Terrans’ efforts were undeniable, but the Gojid populace numbered a few billion. If even a hundred thousand made it off-world miraculously, it was simple math to figure the astronomical casualties. A great Federation power was down to a few colonies, and an endangered species overnight.

Perhaps most concerning, the Arxur knew there was another predator now. My eyes floated back to the window, watching the gray beasts shrink to the size of insects. I suspected tracking down the Earthlings just became their top priority.

Chapter 24

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 28, 2136

18 days. That is how long had passed since the minutes-long speech, and the human ambassador hadn't been outside of this room since. I tried to occupy Noah by teaching him alien games, and watching the happenings on TV. But while he never voiced his complaints, I could sense his agitation.

Chauson visited once a day, logging every aspect of Terran culture he could. The Zurulian prime minster appointed him ambassador to Earth, and the scientist was eager to squeeze everything from the opportunity. He subjected Noah to a myriad of personality tests, as well as asking him philosophical and ethical queries.

The chocolate-skinned human was happy to play along, since it distracted him from the waiting. When Chauson gave him a standard academic test in math and sciences, he was surprised to find Noah scored in the 80th percentile. That was much higher than expected, for a species that was hundreds of years behind our knowledge.

The Zurulian testified before the Federation assemblage today, sharing his novel findings. With any luck, he would be the final speaker. These discussions had dragged on far too long for my liking. At least that signaled it wasn't an easy, unanimous verdict to war with humanity.

Noah yawned, penning a final sentence in his journal. The predator had been logging his thoughts throughout this experience, but would not let me view a word. I would love to know his unfiltered opinions; his secretiveness rubbed me the wrong way.

"I'm tired, Tarva. Wake me up if the execution squad arrives," the Terran said sarcastically. "Good night."

I studied the dark circles under his eyes. "Good night, Noah. Sweet dreams."

The human tucked his notebook into a table drawer, and shuffled out of the living area. I waited for the sound of his footsteps to

recede. Running water reverberated for a few seconds, before the spring of the bulky predator hitting the mattress reached my ears. My heartrate quickened, as the temptation to sift through his journal called me again.

Noah never has to know I looked. You know the aliens' fear has taken its toll on him. Ultimately, it'll help with being supportive and empathetic, right?

I took a deep breath, and counted back from 200 in my mind. Satisfied that the human was drifting off, my paws meandered over to the table. The drawer slid out without a sound, and I lifted the diary. There was nothing wrong with just a peek, surely.

I flipped open to a random page, and began reading the first entry my eyes landed on.

~Sept 17

An accidental smile sent Chauson fleeing in terror, and my heart is heavy with guilt. I'm surprised it took this long to happen. Tarva had to chase him down and explain what the expression means. The Zurulian has tried to accept me, and he shrugged off my apology. But he's afraid of us, deep down, like everyone is.

Why didn't I wear the mask? Why can't I fit in, anywhere?

When I look in the mirror, I've begun to see myself as a predator. If there is a future where humanity can be a healthy contributor to the galaxy, I don't know if I picture it anymore. We want it, but that's not enough. The simple fact of the matter is, nobody wants us.

Even the Venlil are still frightened by us. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around them. Trying so hard not to break them, because they're fragile and innocent. Sometimes, I let my guard down, but that rarely ends well.

Tarva said straight to my face that she thought I was a nasty-looking creature. No matter how much I try to forget about it, through all the laughs and conversation, that is what she thinks of me. Any feelings of attachment are one-way, and I'd do well to remember that.

Yes, there is a shared history now, and the Venlil wish no harm upon us. But they cannot be normal around monsters. Perhaps a better man, a better species, would cut them free…and never show their face again. Instead, I'll just return to this lie, and pretend that we can make friends in the stars.

Dream on.

I recoiled, guilt rushing through my veins. These writings sounded depressed and bitter, unlike the optimist persona he projected. Was Noah's self-image that low, because of me? That comment that I made to Recel wasn't at all what I thought of him now.

Perhaps cabin fever had placed wild ideas in his head, and his outlook was cheerier before the speech. My claws tugged back through several pages, until I reached an earlier entry.

~Sept 6

Recel is a wreck from being near me, but what am I to do? Throw myself into space? The visor, the mask, none of it makes a difference. My face feels constricted already, and the nerves are making me sick to my stomach.

My indecisiveness, on what bits of humanity to include, might be the death of me: literally. The Federation will have a field day upon our arrival. I wonder if seeing me on television will be traumatic for small children? Perhaps I will be posterized as the face of the new enemy.

The questions the Venlil asked when I first arrived left me taken aback, and this will be worse. Governor Tarva is kind to help. Because of me, her species has lost every friend, and are left with a lot of primitive predators for company. Humanity disappoints on every front; the regrets must cross her mind daily. Yet she's too far committed now, so she sticks it out.

My speech feels pathetic and inadequate before I've ever given it. I don't know why it hurts so much, when I understand they're all just afraid. Predators aren't supposed to have feelings, not…

A pointed cough came from behind me. The human was standing with crossed arms, watching me with a livid glare.

"That's private, Tarva!" Noah snapped, and my ears lowered against my head. That was the first time I ever heard the ambassador raise his voice. "You can't just go through my things!"

"You were supposed to be sleeping!" I took a few steps back instinctively, flinging the book on the table. "I thought you seemed agitated. And I knew you wouldn't tell me what's wrong."

"So I tell you 'no' when you ask to read it, and you go snooping anyways?" he growled. "Well congrats, you've dug up some dirt on

the predator."

"Noah…you know I'm so proud of you, don't you?" I whined, tucking my tail between my legs. "You have no idea how glad I am that we met. Your kind never disappointed me. Humanity are wonderful friends, that I am siding against the *entire galaxy* to protect."

"You're trying to do the right thing, Tarva. I appreciate your morality and compassion, infinitely. But let's not pretend anymore. You have to repress your instincts all the time around me, and you find my appearance loathsome."

"My initial reaction was negative, yes, but I find you quite endearing. I didn't personally request you to represent your species because I'm disgusted by you. I've done nothing but worry about your safety since we came to Aafa."

"You…you mean that? Really? You're telling me you don't still think of me as a predator."

"You're my kind and charming *friend*. That's what I see when I look at you. You are the predator… who convinced me to give humanity a chance. I don't think anyone else could have a personality bright enough to shine through that fear."

Couldn't Noah understand our skittishness was a part of us, just like some predatory traits were part of him? There were certain attributes that were difficult to accept, but surely humanity could see how hard we were trying.

The last thing I wanted was for Venlil instincts to have a detrimental effect on his mental health. Initiating contact should prove that there were few lingering fears in my mind.

I flung my paws around Noah's waist, and his breathing tensed up. There was brief hesitation from the ambassador; his stance emanated tiredness and frustration. The human wrapped his arms around me, after I curled my claws into his skin insistently, and relaxed into my comforting embrace.

The Terran ambassador withdrew. "Tarva, I am serious. Don't go through my personal items without permission, ever again."

"I know. Sorry," I muttered.

"Hm. It's impossible to stay angry at you." Noah shook his head

with disdain. “You could get away with just about anything.”

The human stretched out on the couch, closing his predatory eyes. The lines on his face eased, and I watched as his breathing slowed. My own eyelids began to feel heavy, listening to the harsh rumbling of his snores. The big guy was so gentle and sweet, so intelligent and reliable…

As I was about to drift off, the door to the diplomatic suite crashed open. Kolshian soldiers stood in the entryway; their eyes stretched wide when the predator snapped upright. Noah tried to collect himself, and raised his hands in confusion. Seeing that the guards were waving at him to come, he reached for his visor.

I glared at him, and snatched it away from his hand. I threw the metal at the wall, as hard as I could; it broke into two pieces with a satisfying crunch. Noah looked stunned, and apprehensive at the prospect of approaching the guards without it. He swallowed, then grabbed for his mask. My tiny claws scrabbled at his arm, and I shook my head in the human “no” gesture.

The Terran ambassador looked uncertain, but stood up from the couch. The wary Kolshians weren’t attempting to blind him this time. A soldier barked the word “follow”, and began retracing the path to the assembly hall. Heated discussions were creating a clamor inside the chamber; we could hear it from a hundred paces away.

The guards pointed at the podium, and Noah took obedient steps to the stage. Surprised exclamations rose from the crowd, as they saw the human in his uncensored form. Jerulim, the agitated Krakotl from the earlier meeting, was emitting furious squawks at those provocative eyes. I shot a blistering glare toward him.

“We apologize for the delay,” Chief Nikonus began, in a cordial tone. “These are unprecedented circumstances, and we’ve struggled to reach any sort of decision. Has your treatment here been acceptable, Noah of the planet Earth?”

The human dipped his head. “Yes. Thank you for your hospitality, gracious Chief.”

“Good. I’d never let anything like the Gojids did occur within my borders.” The Kolshian palmed an indigo tentacle across his nostrils. “The Federation, as I’m sure you know from the television, has

sought all sorts of counsel on this matter. We reviewed your data sharing, consulted our own records, and brought in numerous experts to testify."

"It looked like many of them had conflicting perspectives," I said.

"Indeed. Historians, xenobiologists, psychologists, zoologists, sociologists, lawyers, economists; we had them all. Several individuals who were trapped within Venlil borders testified too, and we had our own internal discussions. At last, we've tallied every vote."

The Federation could prove to the ambassador that some species *did* desire friendship. Any impartial observer would find humanity worthy of a chance, or at least derive reasonable doubt from their intricacies. My breath hitched in my throat, and I squeezed Noah's hand for support. The predator's palm was damp with sweat.

Nikonus cleared his throat. "Alright. The count of members who voted that humanity cannot be allowed to exist, or should be treated as a hostile party are…38."

I tilted my head. Should we be disappointed that the figure was so high, or relieved that the proportion was only a little over 10%? That was a lot of species ganging up on a single planet; plenty of threats for the predators to fend off.

"Take that, stupid human!" Jerulim chirped. "You're all going to be dead soon."

"There will be no commentary from the audience until I have finished reading the results!" the Chief spat. "65 members voted for no contact or relations with humanity, which entails total isolation of Earth."

I glanced toward the predator. There was more hurt in his eyes after that figure was read, than after hearing the ones who wished him dead. Knowing how much humans craved acceptance, they didn't want to be shunned. The rest of the options had to be more promising, didn't they?

Nikonus squinted at his notes. "74 species are undecided, with 52 specifying that they are awaiting news from the Gojid warzone."

Those are a coin flip. Some people might not take kindly to the fact that predators attacked a Federation homeworld. Then again, it will be apparent that human morality is leagues above the Arxur's.

“107 species vote in favor of a temporary truce, or working together where necessary to defeat the Arxur. Any violation of express conditions will lead to an immediate return to hostilities.”

My ears perked up with hope. After cooperating against the Arxur, some Federation members might become ingratiated to humanity. It could bridge the gap to normal relations. Though I doubted we could call upon their assistance, in regards to the species maintaining contention with Earth.

“Who the fuck voted for that?!” Jerulim squawked.

“My species did, for one,” the Kolshian leader replied. “Er, if that will be acceptable to the humans, of course.”

Noah nodded, shuffling as if expecting to leave. “Yes, it will. We want the Arxur gone from this galaxy, and an enemy of an enemy is a friend to us. Thank you for your time, and giving us a chance.”

“Wait, human. 11 members voted in favor of opening full diplomatic relations. This would involve forming trade, military, and border agreements…if you know anything of the sort. I suggest you ask Tarva for guidance, if those concepts confuse you.”

The ambassador raised a hand to his mouth, no doubt hiding his bared teeth. Perhaps he was amused by Nikonus’ assumption that predators would have no concept of negotiation. Primarily, I believed that Noah was moved by the fact that humanity would return with new friends. It was a tiny number, less than five percent, but it wasn’t zero. That counted for something.

Overall, the results could have gone much worse. If the neutral, isolationist species were counted as in our favor, the majority of the Federation voted against humanity’s extinction. Judging by the furious expressions sprinkled across the chamber, I wasn’t sure every species was going to accept that.

“So many of you would side with *them* over us?!” Jerulim screeched. “Defend or appease humanity like they were a civilized species? Anyone who stands with predators is dead to the Krakotl.”

The avian ambassador dive-bombed over the Chieftain’s cubicle, and slashed his talons at the elderly Kolshian. Nikonus shielded his face with a tentacle, and nearby soldiers rushed to his aid. Jerulim flapped his wings in a frenzy, pledging that anyone who stood with humanity would share their fate. Had the Krakotl forgotten whose

planet he was on?

Other ambassadors launched into shouting matches, and a few made violent gestures toward the human. I didn't want to know what the unfriendly ones were suggesting. Several individuals were trading blows, grappling right in front of the media cameras. A pair of Kolshian guards hurried us out of the chamber, before the predator could get swept up in the chaos.

Noah shared a glance with me, and I knew that tumultuous unrest stirred his own concerns. This vote could be the start of a major rift within the Federation.

Chapter 25

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: September 28, 2136

Armed Kolshians steered us into the docking area, where we landed upon our arrival. Our previous shuttle was outfitted with supplies, since the Chief granted us permission to return home on a pre-arranged route. The soldiers fell back several steps, and monitored the human for any threatening moves. One of them curled their lip at me, briefly.

Noah settled down on an empty crate, clutching a knapsack that contained his meager belongings. He met the soldiers' gaze without blinking. Staring was a contest of dominance, whether that was the intention or not. The Kolshians gripped their rifles tighter, and slunk back toward the entryway.

"You're gawked at all the time, Noah," I whispered. "Not saying it's right, but I don't suggest that smoldering stare-down as a response. It'll tickle their instincts in ways you don't want."

"I don't care how they look at me, but they're *not* going to look at you with disgust and hatred. If they want a problem, they can pick on someone their own size," he growled, loud enough for the guards to hear.

Aggression and protectiveness were not the persona to exhibit, on the verge of our first diplomatic encounter. The Federation representatives would see it as a predator cowing his observers. I appreciated his loyalty, but humans were a little too defensive of their friends at times. Those soldiers were entitled to their opinions.

"Thank you, but it's fine. A lot of people think I'm a disgrace to the Federation, and aren't happy that I imprisoned their people." I studied the guards' expressions, noticing how their scowls deepened at my words. "Nikonus didn't even discuss consequences for the Venlil."

"So you agree with them?! You had noble reasons for what you did. They can't find fault with that."

"Well, I've single-handedly fractured the Federation beyond repair.

I guess that makes me a traitor to most folks."

"You're a hero to all of humankind, Tarva. 12 species in the galaxy who would even try to befriend us. We met what might be the *only* one who would try, before there was a shred of proof to our claims! Don't think we'll forget what the Venlil have risked."

I pressed a claw to my lips, and flicked my ears toward the doorway. The soldiers had snapped to attention, breaking their deadlock with the irate predator. That could only mean someone was approaching; the human needed to make a good first impression. Flattering us, at the expense of the rest of the galaxy, wasn't going to win hearts and minds.

A violet-skinned Kolshian padded into the hangar bay, clearly resisting the urge to grab his sidearm. His steps faltered once he was within pouncing distance of Noah, like a magnetic force was repelling him from the human. The familiar officer crept to my side, using me as a living shield.

How has he still not grasped that Noah doesn't have a violent bone in his body? Didn't our journey here prove that much?

The Terran ambassador grinned. "Recel! I was worried you were rotting in a cell."

The Kolshian rubbed his forehead. "I was, until the Commonwealth finalized our decision on humanity. Chief Nikonus agreed that I had a moral imperative to intervene, and pardoned me on all counts. I did receive a disciplinary mark for my methods, though."

"What do you mean?" Noah asked.

"While Nikonus agrees with my rationale…we can't have officers running around shooting their captains. I don't think I had time to go through 'proper channels', but whatever."

"I see. So you're free. Why did you come here, of all places?"

"Nikonus offered me an appointment as military liaison to Earth, and I accepted."

My eyes widened, as did the ambassador's dilated ones. I thought that Recel hated being around predators! By his own admission, living around humans was a nightmare for him, and he couldn't fathom prolonged exposure to them.

Noah stroked his chin in confusion. "*You* want to be around

predator generals, and talk about war tactics? Don't you hate the thought of having one of us within a hundred miles?"

"Forgive me if I've caused offense, Noah. Seeing your chemistry with Tarva, I think we could be great friends." The Kolshian shuddered as he tried to meet the predator's gaze. "Others seem to adapt quicker and easier than me, but I don't want to give up. Truly."

"Do you think you can work past your fear?" I asked gently. "Have you identified what triggers such a severe reaction?"

"I enlisted on a starship when I was 9. I don't recall another way to feel toward predators. It may take an unreasonably long time for me to work past those behaviors, and it would take considerable coaxing from you all. I can't imagine what this is like from Noah's perspective; I'm not sure I'd have the patience. If you'd like a different liaison, I understand."

Sympathy flashed in the Noah's eyes. "Recel, we are willing to help you every step of the way. I just don't know why you want to endure those…feelings. It seems unfair to you."

"Humanity made me realize we are stronger than the sum of our fears. That there is something other than being afraid. I haven't got there yet, but I'm grateful for that. Can you accept my apology?"

"There's nothing to forgive. Your emotions are out of your control." The edge dissipated from the human's sonorous voice, replaced by a warm tone. "We'll figure this out together. No matter how long it takes."

"G-great. Now, there's other diplomats coming…so I'm going to m-make some preparations."

Recel skittered off to the farthest corner of the hangar bay, and began prepping a second shuttle. That was a smart idea, since it was unlikely the entire crowd would fit in a single vessel. Hell, I doubted some of them would want to ride in a tiny box with a human for days. The first officer was probably thrilled to charter his own ship, for that exact reason.

I watched the Kolshian shoot furtive glances toward us, and pondered why his species hadn't agreed to full diplomatic relations. Chief Nikonus didn't appear hostile to humanity, and displayed more fairness than I anticipated. The prospect of harm befalling

Noah seemed to offend him, even. When my expectations were little more than a farcical hearing, a genuine debate was astounding.

I guess Nikonus didn't propose a full partnership, because he doesn't believe humans can reciprocate their cordiality in a meaningful way.

Nonetheless, I thought the Kolshian Commonwealth might come around as an ally. They had already seized the initiative by sending a military liaison. Even those guards were angered by my lack of accountability, rather than Noah's presence. Maybe it was just too large of a leap for most governments to make at once.

Our Zurulian ambassador, Chauson, skittered into the room. Something seemed to have been bashed against his head, and green blood trailed down his snout. The furry scientist looked unsteady on his feet, but it was a good sign that he wasn't shy of Noah in his wounded state. It violated every prey instinct, to wander up to a predator like this.

Noah squinted with concern. "Are you alright, Chauson? Please, let me take a look at that."

"What happened?" I gasped.

The Zurulian sighed. "A bunch of people rushed to leave the chamber when the fighting broke out. Someone clubbed me over the noggin; I didn't see who. Probably because I testified with a generous view on humanity. The pundits think I swayed some hostile votes to undecided."

"All that, for sharing a synopsis of human morality?!" Noah said. "I'm sorry. I never wanted you to be assaulted."

"It's fine." The scientist licked a foreleg absent-mindedly, smoothing out the brown fur. "I'll look tougher now, when I force you to take me to your planet."

"Ha! Even Tarva won't go to Earth."

"Why not? You haven't invited her?"

"Our…it's complicated, but Elias Meier, our leader, extended the invitation. Had an herbivorous banquet, live music, and a tour of New York City in the works. Tarva refused."

I swished my tail with indignation. "It's a different story after the experiments, Noah. You think I was going to wander into a city with *ten million* predator residents, less than a month after we met?

Before anyone ever saw how you behaved in packs?"

Noah opened his mouth to respond, but snapped it shut as he saw Chief Nikonus leading a group of diplomats toward our ship. These must be the species that constituted the affirmative votes for open relations with Earth. None of them had been brave enough to make introductions yet; our Zurulian friend was the sole exception.

It didn't surprise me to see the Sivkits or the Paltans in the mix. Their centrally-located territories were far enough away that they thought they could keep humanity at arms-length, and control or minimize the interactions. Even predators wouldn't start that off the beaten path to gain a foothold. Us neighboring species were easier to invade first.

Then there were the Yotul, the latest "uplifts." Adapting to the galactic arena was difficult for a species that just discovered steam power. I couldn't imagine how the Venlil would've processed the Federation's vast knowledge in our infancy. Of course, if the Yotul's industrialism tipped us off to their presence, the Arxur might find them too. It was the lesser evil to flood them with information, and give them a fighting chance.

22 cycles after first contact, the marsupials tired of the derision from their counterparts. Most species dismissed them as primitive, with a poor scientific understanding, and little to offer as allies. The Federation military saw the Yotul as a liability, and wouldn't take their suggestions seriously. Gaining the backing of predators was a calculated risk, to coerce some respect from their peers.

So far, no surprises. The Thafki seek protection, since there's only about 12,000 members of their species left alive…well, not in captivity. The Nevoks and Fissans are trading juggernauts that don't want to go the way of the Gojids.

I squinted in apparent confusion. Was that the Mazic president among their ranks? Perhaps this was not the assemblage of friendly species, after all. It wasn't even a personal representative or aide; he was the only official dignitary I observed in the group.

Noah tensed, as he also spotted the beige-skinned mammal. I doubted my friend had forgotten who interrupted him at every turn. Cupo was rather outspoken against humanity, mocking the Terran ambassador for his eyes and criticizing simple arguments.

“Is the alien with the trunk just here to make trouble? The Mazic, you said?” the human whispered, echoing my thoughts. “Them and the Krakotl were the ones who couldn’t stand my presence.”

Cupo swished his trunk. “Your closing argument, about the hypothetical of friendship, was profound. We are, in fact, desperate enough that there is nothing to lose. Am I not welcome here?”

“I didn’t mean for you to overhear that comment, Mazic; my apologies. If you desire diplomacy, I would not turn you away.” Noah lowered his voice to its minimum, and pursed his lips in mistrust. “Damn Tarva. Those massive ears must be sharp.”

I snorted. “No, your ears are just bad.”

The human sighed. “That’s hardly the worst thing you’ve said about us.”

I studied the waiting crowd. While the injured Nikonus bore no intention of making the journey to Venlil space, he opted to send us off himself. There was more sharpness in his gaze than fear; he wasn’t shaking or whining, the way Recel did. Though I appreciated the officer’s efforts, perhaps there were better candidates to represent the Kolshians.

As for the newcomers, the Zurulian was prancing around the human in circles. Chauson couldn’t contain his excitement; he was the only ally eager to get up close and personal with the flesh-eater. Meanwhile, the Sivkit diplomat looked like she was about to pass out, standing across from a predator. Logical talk of borders and distance didn’t mean much when she was going to be trapped in its lair.

The Mazic president had the same suspicion in his eyes from the pivotal meeting. I don’t think he trusted Noah’s demeanor not to shift the second we took flight. There was a Dossur representative present, I realized, but the tiny rodent was hiding behind Cupo’s bulky form. That size differential could only make the lumbering predator more daunting.

That makes my count 10 species, plus the Kolshians. Maybe the last one is running late for some reason…their representative might’ve had a panic attack.

“You’re going to take the Yotul? I thought humans already invented the wheel,” the Nevok representative sneered.

A few chuckles came from the gathering, and even the Kolshian chief struggled to maintain a neutral expression. The Yotul glowered at his critic, then fired a nervous glance toward the human. I suppose the general assumption was that predators would shun any species with weaker technology. It was tough to imagine that friendship was their end rather than the means.

If anything, I think supposed "weakness" roused the Terrans' protectiveness. Noah and Sara were most partial to us in our moments of vulnerability. Judging by how my friend's lips curved down, he wasn't pleased with the Nevok's humiliation of their peer.

"We have plenty to offer, Tossa!" the marsupial snapped. "Maybe these predators will be less stupid than you, and see that!"

Tossa flicked her ears. "Like what? Name one thing that makes you valuable…especially compared to the rest of us."

"For one thing, we're the only ones here who weren't around for *that* vote. You know, the one where you unanimously decided to wipe out all life on Earth. Even the Venlil have that baggage!"

Silence fell over the assemblage. Trepidation played at the representatives' expressions, as the fiery Yotul reminded them of their prior decisions. Perhaps I could afford to issue a formal apology on that matter myself, though it hadn't been my government that arrived at that conclusion. It must be tough for the predators to forget our role in their planned extinction.

"Humanity welcomes all parties, of all backgrounds!" The ambassador cleared his throat, irritation flashing in his eyes. "There's no need for divisive rhetoric, or to 'prove yourselves' by putting others down. We're a small group; we need to band together."

"He's right. There's too much at stake here. Quit acting like children," I growled.

"Gosh. On that unpleasant note… I must warn you that siding with us may put you at odds with your friends and neighbors. This is your last chance to turn back." Noah blinked in surprise, as every party lingered. That was a risk they already considered leaving the acrimonious conference. "Alright then. Let's board a shuttle, and get this show underway."

The UN would be delighted to receive a proper diplomatic envoy,

but I knew I had to temper their expectations. There would be missteps along the way, and few species would act as casual as us. It took a long time to be comfortable around predators. Familiarity was the final phase of the adjustment period, which certain prey sapients might never achieve.

At least now, humanity knew where they stood with the Federation.

Chapter 26

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: September 28, 2136

The humans' actions in the past few days were a showcase of why I was right about them. It brought me relief to see such vindication.

The dishonorable tactics persisted into our home system, sneaking their transports into orbit through diversions. The good, old predatory ruse: these hunter bastards never changed. It baffled me why they didn't commence an orbital raid on the planet, to soften up our populace. Then, I realized that the arrogant apes thought they could get people to come with them, willingly.

The Terrans' supposed rescue attempts targeted children, who were the most susceptible to suggestion. I'm sure they predicted the stampede casualties a ruthless invasion would cause. Every clip I saw was the image of death, and humans baiting their livestock into submission with false kindness.

The higher-ups wouldn't allow ships like mine to attack human positions, due to the fact that they overlapped with civilian dwellings. I didn't want any innocents to die, but I knew it was a kindness to spare them from predatory possession. This was our lone chance to regain control in a timely manner. The only way to get any terrified innocents out alive.

We should've taken the shot, before the predators got more entrenched. Who knows what brainwashing techniques they're employing on our people.

Prime Minister Piri lost it with me the third time I pressed her with a bombing scheme. She said the collateral damage was "unacceptable", and was livid at the proposal. My ship was reassigned to a patrol route by our largest colony for an indefinite duration. Barring a secondary invasion, I was out of the game.

When a message came from the Union government, after several days of silence, I couldn't play it quick enough.

"I hope we're being recalled to the cradle. Piri's had us in timeout for long enough," I growled.

Zarn closed the soundproofed door to the briefing room behind us. “It must be stressful, knowing that they’re on your own world. I knew humans were a conquering species, but it’s another thing to see them in action.”

“Why hasn’t the fucking Federation come to our aid? The cowards must be scared to raise a claw in our defense,” I sneered. “They’re just watching! It’ll be them the humans come for next.”

“Perhaps they think the predatory expansion will end with us. A foolhardy notion. Their kind always want more,” the doctor said.

“I know, Zarn. Shit, let’s see what humans’ve done to cities and children this time. No sense delaying.”

I cast the holopad message to the projector. Holographic footage of the Arxur raiding our homeworld flickered to life, and my spines bristled. Explosions ravaged our planet, wiping out swaths of civilians in one fell swoop. Realization washed over me like a cold shower, as the pieces began to fit into place.

It was so obvious. Of course, the predators were working together; the humans were the brains of the operation. They took out our defenses, so that the red carpet was rolled out for the other sadistic monsters. It was a matter of divvying up the cattle, and finishing off what was left of our populace.

My eyes narrowed with fury. I was so tired of seeing my world exploited by psychotic beasts, who preyed upon the helpless. The amount of death I witnessed in my career was more than anyone should have to endure. Now, billions of souls were about to be whisked away by the two freaks of the galaxy. Unless Gojid forces cheated death, the rock I called home was no more.

Why was nature so uncaring and unfair? No matter how much I tried, there was never any way that I could make the predators’ suffering match ours. Our existence was agony and terror, a living hell.

“They can’t destroy our cradle!” I spat. “It’s sacred. All those people, gone, and for what?”

Zarn’s eyes widened with sympathy. “I am sorry, sir. If there is anything I can do, please let me know.”

“Thank you. But…” I blinked away tears, watching an Arxur bite into a child’s arm. “The humans got what they wanted. I’d like to

watch the end of this. Alone."

The acting first officer swished his tail, and ambled out of the room. None of the Takkan's warnings about humans had done any good to prevent this calamity. We hadn't been smart enough, or fast-acting enough. This was the inevitable conclusion, wasn't it?

Squinting at my holopad, Piri had attached a note to the video. I could almost hear the prime minister's crisp voice, and see the sternness of her expression. It must've been her final action, to pass this media montage to any active communications satellites.

"By the time you view this, I will already be dead. My bunker is on the brink of collapse, pelted by bomb after bomb. This message is being relayed to any high-ranking officers out of system; I hope it finds you in good health. There's no sense addressing the brave souls stationed here.

Our fleet failed to restrain the inbound Arxur ships, with catastrophic losses. We were pre-occupied with the humans, and taking them out any time they lingered near the cradle. The Terran ships burned into the fray, as soon as we abandoned our position against their vector. There was great confusion on who to fight. We figured they planned this scenario in cooperation with the Arxur.

Then, the monkeys began attacking the grays, and broadcasting warnings to the surface. We intercepted signal after signal. It could be staged chatter, but they seemed surprised. Perhaps it was just predatory treachery, betraying an ally for the thrill. It could have been a dispute over the livestock haul.

But this is the last footage I saw. I can't conjure a reason that such sacrifice and tenderness would stem from aggression or cruelty. Those traits are polar opposites. What a marvelous ruse, if it is one.

Please, send word to the Federation, and relate the unspeakable losses of the Gojidi Union. Beg their help. Form your own opinions…and see what is done with the humans' prisoners."

A flash of movement snapped my eyes back to the video. A human soldier plowed into the feasting Arxur, tackling it away from the child. The primate was missing his gun, but swung a knife at the reptilian with a vicious look. His inky pupils were dilated, and his neck veins bulged against his skin. He stepped between the Gojid and the gray, shouting at the kid to run.

What the fuck? Why did he intervene? I thought. *Maybe he had*

claimed the child as his own catch, like Piri suggested…

The Terran jabbed his blade into the Arxur's elongated nose. The gray beast roared in agony, and crunched through the human's stomach with swift jaws. More mammalians rushed over to the kid, peppering the reptile with bullets. They carried the Gojid so… tenderly, shielding the youngling with their own bodies.

"Rescue" was one thing, but it made no sense to die for their intended cattle. I gaped at the footage, staring in silence as the scene transitioned.

A Terran fireteam were surrounded by a school, and fighting to the last. Many of the furless predators were wounded, yet they propped themselves up and kept shooting. It was as though a drug was fueling them. These broken remnants managed to eviscerate an entire Arxur capture squad, by the looks of the time lapse.

As soon as there was a moment of peace, a Gojid child raced into the open and knelt by a human's corpse. He jabbed a claw into the predator's stomach, sobbing in hysterics. The kid showed such feeble emotions in front of those beasts, and their lips didn't even curve into a snarl? Two primates stooped to the ground, and… attempted to console him?

A dangerous thought crept into my brain. *What if the humans did actually care for the children? What would that say about them? They're capable of…they're…*

Every part of me screamed for a refutation. I keeled over, clutching my temples in a desperate attempt to vanquish the thought. There was no logical way to override this narrative as propaganda; it was a transmission from my own government.

"No, no, no! They're predators. Predators don't have feelings," I hissed. "They took your home. They took your family. They took…"

I collapsed into a prone position, bawling. The more I considered it, the more I realized that all of my arguments circled back to humans being predators. To my trauma, and to the planetary history Zarn claimed to know like the back of his paw. Every sneaking doubt that I blocked out flowed through my mind.

The Terrans rushed to tend to the civilians on our world, asking nothing in return. The way they prioritized the children was the same as any nurturing species. They only attacked military targets,

both in our home's invasion and when striking the border outposts.

The last remnants of a bombing run allowed a medical ship to pass, as soon as it was identified. Despite my beliefs, the bombers never so much as glanced at the colony. There was also the chatter we heard on the radio frequencies, expressing sympathy for what the Arxur had done. One pilot said he wanted to negotiate, but his counterpart's retort was that we despised them too much to listen.

I wiped a tear off my cheek. "Nobody but the Venlil ever tried to speak to humanity. I hate…hated them with all my heart."

Crumbling to my conscience's assault, I allowed the memories of *that* week to play in my mind. The delight bubbling in my chest, as I drew screams from a helpless human, was as fresh as yesterday. At the time, it made me exuberant, but now, my sole wish was to undo the cruelty. Recel was right, when he said I was behaving just like the Arxur; he was always the better of us.

What kind of a man enjoyed another creature's pain? That wasn't the behavior of a hero, who was better than the predators he fought. An unbearable agony clasped at my chest; it was a sickening veil of disgust and self-hatred.

I allowed myself to view the event from Marcel's eyes, and imbued some feeling into the predator's mindset. The captain was a cruel individual, who shocked him for the slightest movements. The days were unending agony, with no sense of time or place. He felt his own body withering away, and clung to sanity recalling the kindness of his friend.

How do you persuade someone who hates you, who has already made up their mind about you? Nothing that was said mattered, or was even brought into consideration. The officers wouldn't allow him to speak, and punished him for deceit after his repeated claims of friendship. For the crime of looking at the glass, his eyes were bashed in and clawed.

Marcel lost interest in everything, and became non-responsive. There was the briefest glimmer of hope, seeing his friend Slanek greet him with empathy and care. He thought maybe he could get through to the crew, now. The Venlil confirmed all of his claims about humanity, and it was obvious he loved the little guy…or at least didn't want to eat him.

But the captain rushed to execute him, because he hated that someone listened to a predator. Of course, extorting every bit of suffering first, and making uncivilized threats. The human saw his life flash before his eyes; he felt afraid and alone. What was his crime but existing? Why was this happening to him?

“You did all of that, Sovlin. How could you?” I screamed. “Marcel was never noncompliant, or of a predatory disposition. He was just *sickening* to look at.”

The tears were flowing freely now. I couldn’t live with the knowledge that I inflicted such torment on a sentient creature, who came to my ship in peace. By extension, the ensuing war caused the Gojidi Union to lose our cradle to the Arxur. All I ever wanted was to save my people, and instead, my actions cost billions of lives.

I yanked my sidearm out of its holster, and shoved it into my mouth. Someone who had done what I had didn’t deserve to live. I felt like I was thinking clearer now than I ever had in my life. Just a few more seconds, knowing what a failure I was.

Five, four, three…

With a detached sigh, I tugged the gun out of my gullet. It would be wrong to leave a mess for my crew to clean up, and traumatize another person. Even if I hung myself, someone would stumble across my body. They would live with that image for the rest of their lives.

My stubby legs staggered out of the briefing room, and navigated to a maintenance airlock. The thought crossed my mind to write an apology as a suicide note, but that just didn’t cut it. Staring out at the stars, I knew that I could be free of this guilt. The only trace of this would be a data point on the logs; after my disappearance, someone could fill in the blanks with quiet conjecture.

“CAPTAIN! Please, don’t do it!” Doctor Zarn shouted from behind me, seeing my paw hover over the lever. “They can rebuild your homeworld. Ending your life is a permanent decision, and you will never contribute anything again. It will taint your legacy, and the Union will be weaker for your loss.”

“I don’t care about any of that! Why did you follow me?” I growled.

“Because there is still more to add to your story, sir.” The Takkan raised his paws in a pleading gesture, inching toward me. “Even if

you don't see it, each day is a gift. It's a chance to do something for someone else."

My eyes rolled back, as those last words sank in. The doctor didn't realize why he was right, but he was. These final actions were selfish, the coward's way out, because I was too afraid to turn myself over to the predators' custody. What right did I have to deprive Marcel of his revenge?

Death was too kind for what I did. Suffering was what I deserved; none of the physical pain could be as awful as what I felt now. It was tough to breathe through the oppressive guilt, misery, and regret.

"I have to go," I snapped.

The doctor stiffened. "Sir, you're not in your right mind. We're going to the medbay for observation…"

I shoved past Zarn, speed-walking back to the bridge. My gaze met Rumi's, and I gave the comms technician a slight nod. The young Gojid looked floored to see his captain disheveled and sniffling. My paws moved him aside, and tapped the recording button on his console.

"This is Captain Sovlin speaking. I wish to state for the record that Officer Recel conducted himself in accordance with the highest Federation ethical standards." My eyes swept across the chamber, studying my beloved crew for the last time. "It is my final wish that he succeeds me as captain of this vessel, and that any charges against him are cleared. I…I will be turning myself in for crimes against sentience. That is all."

Astonished gasps echoed across the bridge. Zarn looked baffled which "crimes against sentience" I was referring to. It wasn't my place to persuade him, or to fault him for feeding me slanted information. The responsibility for my decisions fell on my shoulders. I didn't want the rest of my crew taken with me.

The only honorable thing to do was to turn myself over to the humans, and accept my nightmarish fate. I rushed through the corridors to the hangar bay, not wanting to give myself time to chicken out. Whatever the predators did to me was their prerogative, but my expectation was a slow and painful death.

It was quick work to board a shuttle, punching in the stellar

coordinates for Earth. The predators' breeding grounds, hadn't I called it? A planet that filled my heart with hatred, that I longed to destroy with every fiber of my being.

Starlight twisted in the viewport, signifying that my final voyage was about to commence. This wasn't the way I thought my military career would end. Very soon, I would know more about the humans than I ever wanted to.

My mind was adamant that such penance was merited.

Chapter 27

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 1, 2136

Our evacuation party was fortunate to skirt the orbital battle, and depart the system with a fair distance between us and the Arxur. The Terran transport unloaded its critically wounded passengers at a Venlil border outpost, while the rest of the posse trekked on to Earth. I wasn't sure how the predators planned to deal with the terrified aliens upon arrival.

Marcel had been stabilized by onboard medics, and didn't want to send Nulia to a refugee site run by predators without him. In fact, I got the feeling that he bore no intention of leaving her in a camp at all. Every Gojid on the vessel gawked at him yesterday, when he launched into a silly song about a twinkling star to put her to sleep.

Marcel was the reason I resisted the temptation to disembark, in the relative safety of a Venlil station. After every horror that befell him in space, I was uncertain if he'd ever return to the stars. Our separation could be permanent. The last thing I wanted was for our friendship to conclude with me showing fear and disgust toward his species.

If someone told me when I signed up for the humans' first contact program that I would willingly go to their home world, I would've keeled over laughing. But I felt guilty over how my instincts ran amok on the Gojid cradle, and how quick I was to fault the predators for things they had no role in. Was my trust in humanity really that conditional? Were my prejudices still alive?

The mere sight of Marcel in the doorway had me in shambles, at our first meeting. Now, I don't think about it when he snarls or picks me up. I don't react to any humans' eyes either, not even strangers or crowds. Maybe I've made more progress than I give myself credit for.

All sorts of bizarre ideas waltzed through my imagination, when I tried to envision Earth. I was the first Venlil to visit humanity's home; not even the bravest scientists or diplomats would venture to the "blue marble." It was a massive step, which might be a far cry from my preconceptions of society.

Landing on Terran soil would place me at the whims of their

government, and expose me to the general populace. It would offer better insight into what the average predator was like, but was that a positive? I was woefully unprepared for what I had seen, mixing in with the UN military units.

As the spacecraft touched down, I tried to remind myself that it was too late to back out. This was not the time for second thoughts; my fright would only contribute to the other passengers' panic.

"Gojid refugees, line up single file and prepare to exit the ship. Anyone who fails to follow the directions of UN soldiers will be hit with a tranquilizer dart, for your own safety," a grating voice growled over the PA system. "Volunteers are handing out blankets, water, and dried fruit. If you require medication or special accommodations, approach the nearest human in a white coat or red cross insignia. You are safe here. Please do not panic."

I snorted. *Easier said than done.*

The humans' statements didn't have the calming effect they desired; there wasn't a single refugee that didn't look petrified. One elderly Gojid collapsed with a thud, clutching her chest. The terror generated by this amount of predators could certainly cause a heart attack. Terran medics gestured for everyone to move back, and hurried to cart the cardiac victim out.

For the Gojids on board, it must appear they were being towed to a predators' lair as cattle. Ferocious-looking soldiers with massive guns were corralling them into the open air. Who would believe a beast's claim, that they would return anyone that wished to leave to a Gojid or Federation territory, as soon as they arranged terms with their government?

"Hi, Slanek," Tyler said hesitantly.

The blond human took a timid approach, as if worried about frightening me. As traumatic as his table manners were, the big guy's intentions were benevolent. He couldn't help that his taste buds evolved with such a vile proclivity. Like Marcel explained, it was biology that was beyond their control.

I was aware that predators consumed meat by definition, and that didn't negate everything I knew about their rich emotions. Humans weren't like the Arxur, hunting living creatures; they cultivated cell samples in a lab. What was so amoral about that, other than the fact

that it was appallingly gross?

It's on the same level as consuming fecal matter. Don't exactly want to share a table, or drink out of the same saucer. But it doesn't have to shape my entire opinion of him. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Thanks for saving my life, Tyler. Sorry for freaking out back there." I pinned my ears against my head, and saw his eyes soften at my scared expression. "It was a good idea on paper, for me to help humanity communicate with civilians. But I had no idea what I was signing up for. It was sensory overload, all the death, predation, and aggression."

"It's cool. I forget how much you guys hate predators sometimes. I know, Marcel doesn't…but how could he?" the flesh-eater muttered.

Following Tyler's sharp gaze, my own eyes landed on the redhead. I couldn't help but notice the looks Marcel shot the Gojid adults throughout the ride. Clearly, his own species picked up on it too. This mission wasn't the thrilling revenge jaunt he dreamed of.

My friend's right limb was stuffed in a sling, while his dominant arm held the spiky child. He was clutching Nulia to his chest, like he expected someone to take her away. His hazel eyes were glazed over, as he watched the adult refugees stumble outside. A tear rolled down his cheek, which the young Gojid poked with a claw.

"Don't cry," she whimpered. "Why are you sad?"

The human pawed at his eyes. "I'm not. Just tired."

The child tilted her head. "But you JUST slept for hours, Mawsle!"

"Marrrr-cel," he enunciated, rolling the r sound with a reverberating growl. "You can say it, dear."

"Mawah…sell." Nulia hooked her claws into the corners of his lips, and tugged them upward. I gaped at her bravado, playing with a predator's eating orifice. "There's the happy snarl! Stay like that."

Marcel flashed his teeth with genuine amusement. He glanced at me, noticing that Tyler and I were both watching with concern. The vegetarian struggled to his feet, limping toward us at the rear of the line. We shuffled to the exit as a pack, and my nerves surged through my veins. Warm sunlight struck my face, as I took my first look at humanity's home.

The refugee camp was based in a decommissioned airport, judging by its appearance. Various structures had been converted to lodging, and tents dotted the runways. Humans were passing out supplies in what I thought was a former hangar bay. Doctors checked on any Gojids showing signs of life-threatening distress.

Camera crews were parked on the other side of a chain-link fence. A few predators shouted the word Venlil, trying to get my attention. For better or for worse, my image was as the first representative of my species here. I forced myself to straighten, and offered the most human-like wave I could muster.

UN guards manned the perimeter, allowing only cleared personnel through the gates either way. Alarm rocketed through my veins, as I spotted a ferocious, four-legged predator alongside them. The brown-and-black beast made the humans look cute and cuddly. I was sure its serrated fangs could puncture their flesh like pudding, but the primates seemed oblivious.

It sniffed the air with twitching nostrils, and eyed the armed Terrans with hungry pupils. I knew they had forward-facing vision, but how could they be that blind to their surroundings? How could the dangerous beast have drawn that close to them unnoticed?

My survival instincts leapt into overdrive. “RUN! PREDATOR! SAVE YOURSELVES! RUN, QUICK!”

Wait, Marcel can’t run. He’s going to get picked off first; him and Nulia are an easy target. The humans need to gun down the predator before it gets to us!

I bolted back toward the transport, overcome with a blinding terror. Tyler raced after me, closing the distance with long strides. He scooped me up despite my shrill, incoherent protests, and walked back to Marcel and the child.

“There’s a lot of predators here, Slanek,” Marcel sighed. “What, you’ve never seen a human before?”

I thrashed in Tyler’s grasp, trying to get him to put me down. My ability to formulate words other than “predator” or “run” was greatly diminished. A pitiful squeak escaped from my mouth, and I jabbed a claw at the monstrous quadruped. It was panting and slobbering over the humans’ boots! Were they the most clueless species in the galaxy?

Nulia screeched as she spotted the beast, and understanding flashed in Marcel's eyes. He massaged the child's neck, seeing her spines pop up. Why didn't the human seem the least bit afraid? Why didn't he call to the guards to shoot the predator?

"That is called a dog," Marcel said slowly. "We domesticated them thousands of years ago…which means we trained them to be friendly to humans."

Tyler grinned. "I have one at home! They helped us with hunting back in the old days, but now we keep them as p—"

"Companions," my human interjected. "Dogs are loyal and obedient to us. They're not sapient, but we have a close bond. Those UN guys have the 'predator' situation under control."

I watched as a Terran soldier patted the dog on its head, and its tongue lolled out of its mouth. The human fished into his pocket, pulling out a cookie. He placed it into his hand, stretching his palm as flat as it could go, then offered it to the fanged predator. What was this madman doing? Trying to lose a limb?

The beast sniffed at the offering, and wagged its tail. Disbelief filled my chest as it snapped up the morsel, seizing the food without nicking the man's hand. It barked at the Terrans, who were showering it with toddler-esque praise. Did that non-sapient predator understand their words?!

I can't believe even humans tried to befriend that…thing. Conditioning dogs "to be friendly to humans" means they weren't always friendly, I mused. *And Tyler keeps one in his residence, like that is normal. How can he sleep with it around?*

Tyler sensed that I calmed down enough, and placed me back on the ground. Was that how human hunting worked; co-opting other predators to do their dirty work? Marcel promised an answer once we were out of danger, but had yet to fulfill his vow. My outburst already drew a lot of unwanted attention though, so I decided not to say anything now.

One human took brisk strides toward us, flanked by a group of soldiers. His thinning salt-and-pepper mane, and crisp coat with a UN pin, looked familiar. Dear stars, it was the Secretary-General himself; I recognized him from our landing at the outpost. Was his entourage coming to arrest me for inciting panic?

“Slanek, isn’t it? Welcome to Earth!” Elias Meier leaned in, so close that I could feel his breath inside my ear. The air movement tickled the sensitive hairs, and I resisted the urge to paw at it. “Act natural and pose for the cameras for a moment. It’ll be bad PR for everyone if they think you’re afraid of us.”

The human official draped his arm across my neck, and I forced myself not to shy away. Why did the predators always have to grab for the vital areas? All he’d have to do would be to lock his elbow, to constrict my throat.

“I apologize for the canine presence.” The Secretary-General spoke the words in a booming tone, and I sensed that he was trying to tell the media that I hadn’t freaked out from the humans. “The dogs are necessary for security purposes.”

“Security from what?” I whispered.

Meier smiled, but did not answer. He slipped his arm from my shoulders, and gestured for us to follow him. I tailed behind the UN leader on shaky legs, terrified to traverse the checkpoint. Marcel and Tyler lurked at the rear, probably to seal off my escape route if I tried to run.

The dog was tethered by a thin rope, on closer inspection, but it seemed to be pulling the humans more than anything. Those awful eyes were watching me; its yellowed fangs were the size of my ear. I couldn’t stop hyperventilating. A predator like that could smell my fear, couldn’t it? What could the Terrans do if it lunged at me?

A tinted vehicle was waiting with a door ajar, and Meier flicked a hand toward the car. I didn’t need a second invitation to spring into the steel death trap. Marcel and Tyler squished in beside me, while the Secretary-General found a seat opposite us. The Gojid child was inconsolable after the dog sighting, sobbing into my human’s grimy uniform.

Meier raised his eyebrows. “Where are your parents, kid? They must be worried sick about you.”

“No they’re not!” Nulia wailed. “I called for my mommy and she never came back. She didn’t care if Mawsle or the bad monsters ate me.”

Marcel gave her head a gentle pat. “Your mother made a mistake, darling, because she was *really* scared. She loved you very much.”

Tyler nodded. “That’s right. You’re a good kid.”

Meier’s eyes lingered on Nulia for a moment. His thinly-veiled displeasure suggested he’d prefer if Gojid children weren’t roaming his planet. Evidently, he decided it wasn’t good PR to force Marcel to leave her behind either.

“Anyhow. Sorry about that mess, Slanek. I had no idea the Venlil were sending visitors, though don’t misunderstand me. We’re thrilled to have you here,” the Secretary-General said. “I’ll work out luxurious arrangements for all of you. If there’s anything you want, just ask.”

I cuddled up to my human. “T-thank you, sir.”

“Anything for our galactic neighbors. I’m pleased that you both returned alive, especially with how symbolic your connection has become here on Earth. Speaking of which…I have some positive news.”

Marcel leaned forward. “Positive news?”

“Sovlin has been arrested by UN forces. He’s being held in a clandestine facility for alien POWs, and is awaiting trial.”

My eyes widened, while my friend’s gaze narrowed. How had the Terrans tracked down the sadistic Gojid? Regardless of their methodology, I was relieved the captain wouldn’t get away with his wretched deeds. If the predators executed Sovlin, it would satisfy Marcel’s wish for his death. The anger boiling inside him was taking its toll on his kind soul.

“Take me there,” my human growled. “I want to see him.”

Secretary-General Meier exhaled, shaking his head in the negative. “That’s not a good idea.”

“So what? Pull some strings. I’m not going to do anything drastic,” Marcel said.

“And why would I risk the political fallout, if you did attack an alien prisoner in our custody? There is zero benefit to any party, and we aren’t prepared to host visitors there regardless. You’ll be able to see Sovlin in court.”

“C’mon! All I want is a short conversation, Meier.” The red-haired human’s expression was pleading, and his eyes searched the UN leader’s resolute face. “I’ll go along with whatever media strategy

you want in return. You know I'm important to our propaganda efforts, at home and abroad."

The UN leader stared out the window in thought. Was Marcel's claim that he was that vital to the Terran narrative accurate? The Secretary-General crossed his arms with a resigned sigh, like he hated his next actions. A holopad found its way into his hands, and he began typing out a message.

"I'm sure I will regret this. I'll let you peek at his cell from outside. You can enter *only* if Sovlin wants to see you," Meier rumbled. "Understand?"

Marcel nodded. "Yes."

My ears pinned back against my head. Those predatory eyes brewed with such a deep hatred, that it made me squirm. There was no telling whether the human could…or would restrain his aggression, once his tormentor was within grasping distance.

Whatever happened, my primary hope was that this confrontation would bring him peace, at last.

Chapter 28

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 2, 2136

A harsh buzzing drifted into my ears, rousing me from unconsciousness. I stirred on the thin cot, and grunted at the mattress' inflexibility. Terror flooded my mind as I realized where I was. Gravity this authentic could only mean I was on Earth.

I had received a military greeting as soon as I neared the Sol system. When I informed them of my name and intent to surrender, the humans ordered me to power off my vessel's engines. A breaching ship jostled my shuttle, and pumped a sleeping vapor through the ventilation shafts. The predators weren't taking any chances of trickery or resistance.

The accommodations were reasonable, with every basic necessity available. By comparison, the Arxur kept their captives in squalor; a pen designed for five soldiers would be the size of my room's bed. The reptiles had no qualms about piling us on top of each other and degrading our dignity.

Water and a fruit bowl were sitting on a small table. The drinking liquid wasn't the unsanitary sludge I'd expect from predators. My cell was caged by a barred door, but it was spacious enough to walk around. The barrier slid open as the buzzing noise finished, and shoe thuds echoed through the vicinity.

I might never see a person that's not a predator again, I realized with a chill. *That's very likely.*

A pudgy Terran male in layered garments entered, studying me with a calculating gaze. My spines felt like they were about to worm their way out of my back. Those eyes were revolting; an unyielding assertion of dominance! Was he dissecting me in his mind, or searching for my vulnerable areas?

The predator tugged out a metal chair, and beckoned me to the table with a finger. I steeled myself for the physical pain I knew was about to occur.

"Well." I slunk over to the opposing chair on shaking legs. "Go on

then."

The crown of fading white hair signified his age, I presumed. He fished a stack of papers out of a briefcase, and placed some glass adornment over his eyes. The beast looked like he engorged himself on flesh regularly; how else would he have fattened up like that?

Words were insufficient to describe the numbing dread, snowballing in the pit of my stomach. Figures that the humans waited until I woke up to start reciprocating the cruelty. I was on the other end of Marcel's plight, caged with a monster with no way out.

"Hi Sovlin. My name is Anton Kozlov, and I'm your legal counsel," the human said.

I cleared my throat. "L-legal counsel?"

"Yes. If you are unsatisfied with my services, we can find you another representative," he replied.

"I…I don't understand. Representative…represent me for what?"

"You're going to be put on trial for crimes against humanity. Your case has been referred to the International Criminal Court by the UNSC. Er, that's the United Nations Security Council."

My ears could hardly process what they were hearing. Humanity had a proper court system, that relied on evidentiary claims to establish guilt, and stable institutions?! It all sounded so tame and normal.

And United Nations? Since when is the humans' government unified? Every source says they do nothing but war with each other.

"First off, such d-d-decorum is…undeserved. T-there is no question that I did what I am accused of," I stuttered. "Why would there even be a hearing?"

Anton's lips curved down. "Everyone has the right to a trial. Presumed innocent until proven guilty. We are a civilized species, with laws and justice systems, you know."

"I wish you weren't."

Savage retribution would at least alleviate my guilt over my own sadism. This calm professionalism was twisting the knife. The self-proclaimed lawyer had to know he was defending someone who would've killed his whole species, in a heartbeat. If I stumbled across him in my domain, I would've tormented him without

refrain.

“Anyhow. Let’s go over the charges, and the facts of the matter. The ICC believes that your case has gravitas enough to fall under their jurisdiction.” The predator passed a packet in front of me, which detailed my crimes in their angular script. “While you tortured a single human, it was intended as an attack against our entire species. You’re the first alien to face trial by Terran law, so I’d say that’s important enough.”

“Okay.”

“You also bore the intent to genocide civilians, which granted, there is less direct evidence of. If you cannot understand these charges, let me know. We can try to translate them into your language, though I cannot vouch for the accuracy.”

“I have a translator. I understand just fine.” I lowered my head in shame, despising every word of sophistication he uttered. “How do I confess? I am guilty. I don’t wish to dispute the charges.”

I definitely don’t want to see evidence of what I did to Marcel. I wish I could forget about that beast. Oh stars, what if he comes to watch the proceedings?

“You can plead guilty, but I think there is a solid defense in the making. Of course, the evidence against you is airtight.” The human paused, and tapped a finger to his temple. Maybe they tried to use their hands like we used tail signals. “With your innate resentment of predators, I think there is substantial evidence to argue insanity. We can beseech the court for leniency on those grounds.”

“What? That’s not what I want. You’re predators. You can think of a brutal and agonizing way for a man to die.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I want my actions repaid. Request the worst imaginable sentence your government can give…please. Something torturous!”

Anton squinted at me. He poured a glass of water, and pushed it toward me with a sigh. The primate must be mocking me by concocting such a defense; there was no psychological excuse for my untenable hatred. I failed at every opportunity to revert my course, and never used a scrap of logic.

The last thing I wanted was for Terran judges to empathize with my

perspective. The predators needed to prove themselves to be a little unhinged or vindictive. Maybe they could have some feelings, but they weren't just ordinary, docile people.

"Prisoners are not tortured on this planet," the human explained. "It's explicitly forbidden by our laws. While you are in UN custody, your needs will be cared for. You will be imprisoned if convicted, likely for a period of 10 to 20 years."

My eyes widened. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"Imprisoned where? Like where I am now?"

"Yes. This facility was specifically set aside, in case we captured any Federation prisoners of war."

"Make an exception. WHAT KIND OF PREDATORS ARE YOU?!"

The lawyer eyed my flailing claws nervously. "You need to calm down. I'll be back when you're ready to discuss your case."

The predators had a much better grasp on their aggression than I thought. There wasn't a scratch on my physical form, nor had there been the deployment of intimidation tactics. Even screaming at Anton couldn't evoke the violent reaction I desired. If anything, my antagonization seemed to frighten the old man.

"If you're just going to dream up excuses, don't come back at all," I growled. "I don't need legal counsel."

The white-haired human collected his belongings, shaking his head in what I thought was frustration. That refined conversation wasn't at all on par with my expectations. They were supposed to enact all sorts of predatory compulsions on me; not confine me under humane conditions, to ponder what I had done.

This is the worst outcome. They have every chance to return the favor, yet they choose to be better.

"Listen. If you want to plead guilty, that's your right." Anton paused at the door, as he was buzzed out by the guards. "But let me test the waters first. See what sort of deal the UN are willing to offer."

"Why would they offer anything?!"

"You're still one of the Federation's most brilliant tacticians. That counts for something."

“I…fine. I really don’t care anymore.”

“Excellent. Oh, and Sovlin. There’s…oh shit…someone else here to see you. You may want to refuse him.”

“Would Cap here *dare* to turn me away?” A steaming voice hissed, so throaty that it sounded like a snarl. “I have a right to face him.”

The lawyer hurried out, and a muscular silhouette appeared by the door frame in his place. The new predator was baring his teeth, with strained breathing that verged on panting. This must be the interrogator I was waiting for!

I curled my claws for the humans to send him in, assuming they were monitoring the cell somehow. They must not have understood.

“Do you wish to speak to the visitor?” a gruff voice crackled through a speaker. “There is no established visiting area at the moment. We can arrange a separate meeting under more defined circumstances, if you wish.”

I blinked slowly. “No need for pomp and circumstance. Send him in now.”

The bars creaked out of the way. The human stalked in, with a guard tailing behind; my visitor limped like he was wounded. One arm was placed in a sling, and a bandage was tied around his leg. His short hair bore an orange tinge, but it was no more than stubble on his scalp. The predator’s face was beet-red, marred by three long scars that carried a lighter shade.

The pattern of those marks clicked with the nagging images in my head. I gasped in horror, and struggled to keep myself still. My eyes turned toward the floor, as Marcel shoved his crooked nose inches from my face. Every part of me wanted to hide under the bed; it would be much easier to pretend he wasn’t here.

At least I didn’t kill him. His skeleton is much healthier…and he’s lopped off what little hair humans have. Stars, he is hideous.

“LOOK AT ME!” the Terran roared.

I took a shaky breath, and gazed into his hazel eyes. The human’s expression was contorted, with a coat of water swelling around his pupils. The depth of emotion, when I truly looked, was staggering; not the soulless abyss I saw them as before. It was a looking glass to his conflicted mind, which was beleaguered by resentment and

recollection.

“Every time I close my eyes, I’m back there. I can’t be touched on the neck, without thinking of your fucking collar.” Marcel’s raspy voice sounded choked, and I heard snot bubbling in his nose. He furiously wiped a tear away. “I can’t look in the mirror, without seeing your fucking scars! I’m reminded of you by everything.”

My skin tingled from the feel of his warm breath on my snout. Guilt plagued me, twisting my insides into knots. How could the human return to his society and act civilized, after being treated like an animal?

Wetness trickled down my own cheek, and my vision grew fuzzy. I could see truth in his words, that the anguish wreaked havoc on his mind daily. Maybe beating the shit out of me, or killing me, would give him some closure.

“I don’t want to hurt you again. B-but when you start attacking me, I won’t be in control anymore. I suggest you start with the claws, or t-tie up my paws,” I croaked.

The predator slammed a fist on the table, baring his teeth. “All I want is to know why. What have I ever done to you? Why did you do it?”

“Because when I look at you, I see the Arxur. I’m s-sorry.”

“You’re sorry?! Fuck you!” he spat. “You’re a piece of shit, you know. A lying sack of shit!”

“I…h-how am I lying?”

“Tell me the real reason. You said they took everything from you, when you were about to kill me. What did you mean?”

“You don’t care. I don’t talk about that, ever.”

“Don’t you owe me that much?!”

I drummed my claws on the chair. If Marcel could derive meaning from that wretched tale, it was something I had to rehash one more time. Sorrow filled my throat, just reminiscing about it.

Arxur shuttles snuck past our defenses, and the reptilians went on the hunt. One of the first places they landed was my neighborhood. The Gojid armada’s efforts failed to stave them off; therefore, it was my fault that those monsters tormented my family. Unspeakable things were done to the only two people I loved.

I spectated the whole event, from a holopad that was dropped on the floor in panic. The awful screams were something I tried, and failed, to blot out of my mind. The reason I led that famed charge against the Arxur fleet, was the paralyzing grief I felt that day. It was meant as suicide; dying in a righteous blaze of glory. Instead, I was saddled with a heroic mantle, and consigned to live for nothing more than vengeance.

“They killed my family. While I was on a call to wish my daughter good night…happy? It’s no excuse.”

Marcel stepped away at last, pacing by the door. I was surprised he didn’t throw that back in my face, and try to reopen the wound. Even if humans could feel empathy, there was no reason to extend that to me. Slanek’s words about how “kind and gentle” this predator was rang in my ears; the Venlil staked his life on that belief.

This isn’t someone who is cruel and sadistic. This is a good person, who is dying on the inside… because of you.

“Indeed. There’s no excuse for what you did,” the predator decided. “But I saw what the Arxur do. I saw a lot of things I can’t begin to describe.”

“Saw how? It’s not the same on television.”

“I didn’t get shot twice sitting on the couch, Sovlin. I deployed on your ‘cradle’, don’t you call it? You don’t even give your fucking homeworld a proper name.”

“How is that any worse than naming your planet ‘Dirt’?”

“Well…fine, on your cradle. I saw Arxur soldiers munching on a Gojid’s organs in the middle of a fucking battle. Them plucking people off the streets to God knows what fate; us racing to evacuate anyone. Cities wiped off the map, and explosions all around us.”

Marcel’s voice quavered with horror, and his eyes stared blankly at the wall. There was a grim sincerity in his testimonial. It would be easy to interpret his anecdote as gloating, but he seemed saddened by the destruction of my homeworld. The humans hadn’t wished such a senseless fate upon us; it was us who yearned for a genocide against their race.

I chewed at my claws with despondency, mourning the infinite loss of the cradle. The question nagged at my mind, whether any

humans partook in the flesh consumption, but I bit back that morbid curiosity. I should just let the predator continue uninterrupted.

“There were children crushed to death by their own parents, left broken in the streets,” he recalled. “A massacre as far as the eye can see. The stench of death, flies buzzing in the air…you all did that to yourselves. Humans would *never* do that to our kids.”

A predator speaking as though a stampede was a conscious choice, and claiming the moral high ground; this was all so bizarre. The notion of humans caring for their young, or having any kind of family unit was jarring. To think of them forming attachments felt alien to my brain.

“Somehow, you’re the worst of it all, Sovlin. I will never escape what you did.”

I swallowed. “So what do we do now? Are you going to kill me?”

“Oh, I dreamed about killing you. Tearing you from limb to limb.” Marcel pinched the bridge of his crooked nose. “But that’s not who I am. Not to Nulia, not to Slanek, and not to myself. You don’t get to take that away from me.”

“I d-don’t understand. Take what away?”

The predator’s lips curved up into a snarl, revealing his pointed canines. “How I treat a monster…it says a lot more about me than you. I’m proud to be human, and I wake up every morning without feeling like a total piece of shit. Can you say the same?”

Marcel stalked away with a limping gait, and the door clanged open at his behest. The human receded down the corridor, as did the UN guard shadowing him. The heavy clops of their feet faded out of earshot. My spines began to settle, left without the company of any predators.

That final question resonated through my head; the scarred flesh-eater knew that answer as well as I did. It was my treatment of a perceived abomination that shaped me into one myself. And no…I don’t think I’d ever feel pride or contentment again. The spark that made me Sovlin, the brazen officer, was gone for good.

When the Terran lawyer returned, I decided to go along with his merciful plots. Humanity treated monsters with dignity for their own sake, and who was I to ruin it for them?

Chapter 29

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 3, 2136

Our van cruised along the multi-lane highway, granting me a perfect view of the passing scenery. The road was packed with cars, with light signals governing the traffic flow. The humans were more enterprising and entertainment-driven than I anticipated. Intermittent signs advertised shops, restaurants and hangouts. Dwellings were mostly tucked away on side streets, away from the hustle-and-bustle of traffic.

Earth is not as harrowing as I expected. There's not a single sign of violence or corpses lying around. It's just people, going about their lives.

We were en route to a refugee camp, per the Terran government's request. Despite their best efforts, humans lacked knowledge of our basic biology and necessities. They also were having difficulty getting any Gojids to speak to them…for obvious reasons.

The predators asked whether I would be willing to provide guidance, and assist communication with the more frightened individuals. My attorney noted that there was nothing offered in return, but I was happy to help my people. The few thousand that were left, anyways.

Anton leaned in. "Remember, this is a test to see if you'll cooperate. You need all the goodwill you can get here. Don't do anything stupid."

The lawyer looked nervous sitting next to me, even with the cuffs around my forepaws. An ankle monitor was also strapped to one leg, suppressing my circulation. The predators didn't trust me not to run off, the second I tasted fresh air. If I intended to flee, why would I have flown a ship into the heart of their territory?

There were two UN officers at the front of the vehicle, wearing matching artificial pelts. The primates' skin must be sensitive to light, with how they wore extensive garments at all times. Their eyes barely left me; the constant tracking meant my spines hadn't settled for the hours-long ride. The build-up of fear chemicals was dizzying.

I coughed. “Uh, guard predators. C-can…I say something, if I, um… think that my people are b-being mistreated?”

One of the officers, named Samantha, gave a curt nod. “Yes. You may.”

“If you have any ideas for cultural elements that are missing, that’s acceptable as well,” the other soldier, Carlos, growled. “We know nothing of your religions or customs.”

That old anxious habit of chewing at my claws cropped up again. The most popular deity worshipped in our systems was the Great Protector, a nature spirit that warded off predators. I never believed in such nonsense myself; judging by how the Arxur terrorized us, there was no one safeguarding our cradle.

Probably shouldn’t tell literal predators that our higher power is supposed to keep their kind away. I doubt they’d let Gojids exercise patronage to her, once they discover that.

My faint curiosity wondered what sorts of beliefs the Terrans were governed by. Carlos’ words implied that they did have religions, which must shape their society’s morality. Perhaps their gods offered wisdom such as only killing when necessary, and giving their quarry swift deaths? That could explain their prey-like conventions on prisoners and warfare.

Our van paused by a secured gate, where more humans waved it into a large paved area. The vehicle parked itself by a hangar bay, and the operators switched off the ignition. The UN soldiers stalked around to open the rear hatch.

A dark corner of my mind fed me awful ideas about what condition the Gojid refugees were in. What if the predators lost patience with the more fearful individuals while we were in transit? What if being around this many prey animals at once stirred the humans’ appetite, even if they didn’t want it to? This had to be a massive temptation.

“What are you waiting for, Sovlin?” Samantha waved a hand impatiently. “Get a move on it.”

Anton snaked his fingers around my wrist, steadying me as I stumbled out of the van. The predator’s skin was slick and oily; the touch sent a shudder through my veins. I tried to use my surroundings to ground myself, and forget about my proximity to the Terran.

There were no hints of any pens, suspicious contraptions, or butchering tools. This appeared like the helpful facility the predators proclaimed it to be. Thousands of Gojids were milling about, while humans lingered by designated assistance tents. The largest line was at a station labelled for locating loved ones.

“You can’t have gotten many people off planet,” I muttered. “Why give them hope?”

Carlos crossed his arms. “Such a cynic. If we reunite a handful of friends or family, then it’s worth it.”

The female guard shook her head in disapproval as well. She fished a yellow object out of her pocket, and tugged down the outer skin. The soft flesh below had to be from a plant, judging by the lack of eyes, limbs, or blood. Was she offering me food? I wasn’t hungry.

To my bewilderment, Samantha took a bite out of the clasped vegetation. The seeds in the half-eaten object confirmed that it was a fruit, rather than any animal organ. This predator was chowing down on prey snacks, right before my eyes! I thought it might be curiosity what our food tasted like, but she seemed too bored for it to be interest.

Marcel could have eaten fruit? I thought the only way to feed him was to sacrifice a crew member, I mused, with a guilty pang. *Stars, are these humans even predators at all?*

Samantha’s forward-facing eyes locked on me. “Why are you looking at me like that?!”

“You…you eat plants?” I squeaked.

Anton nodded. “We’re omnivores, Sovlin. Humans can eat meat, but that’s not the main part of our diet.”

“Umnuver?” I struggled to pronounce the tonal word, since no equivalent existed in my language. “Okay. Uh, sorry for gawking. M-maybe just show me something you want my help with?”

Carlos steered me toward a large dormitory, palming his chin in thought. This predator had strange green markings across his arm. Was that some sort of customary brand, for males in their service? Maybe it was a way of denoting his kill count, or ancestral heritage? The olive-skinned human didn’t notice me studying him, which was a relief.

The male guard checked that no Gojids were watching, before pointing to the far end of the bunks. “See that group huddling over there? How they seem to be protecting that chap with the beige claws?”

“What about it?” I answered.

“That guy they’re shielding has been unresponsive to any of our orders,” Samantha chimed in. “Completely ignoring us.”

Carlos nodded. “Which isn’t the issue. Lots of Gojids haven’t been very cooperative, because they’re afraid or otherwise. But this particular fellow, it’s like everyone tries to get him away as quickly as possible.”

“So what? You, um, want me to get this one to listen to you? I can’t guarantee I can do that.”

The predator shook his head. “Just find out why they’re hiding him. If he’s a celebrity, a religious leader, a politician…I don’t know. If he’s important to you all, we can give him special treatment.”

The Gojid in question wasn’t anyone that I recognized. If I didn’t know him, it was unlikely he was famous enough that large percentages of our people would pick him out. A suspicion flickered in my mind, that this one had some sort of disability.

Everyone knew that predators practiced the “survival of the fittest” maxim of nature. The humans had ample emotions, but would they knowingly expend resources on a deficient individual? Someone with a permanent handicap wouldn’t be helpful for rebuilding our species, to the predatory mindset. Surely, they’d want that trait wiped out of the gene pool.

Humans probably would think they’re doing us a favor, with how limited our numbers are. They’d never understand why we nurse an individual who cannot care for themselves, or can never live a normal life.

“Er, I’ll check in,” I growled. “Don’t come with me. Nobody will talk to you.”

Samantha tossed the finished fruit peel into a waste bin. “Fine. Don’t try to run. That band on your ankle will tell us where you are.”

My conscience was torn, as I wandered over to the group. While I owed the predators an immense debt, one I could never atone for,

sacrificing another person's life felt immoral. Perhaps I should have just refused to help; if I didn't know anything, it couldn't be used against the poor guy.

A Gojid female watched my approach, and pointed a claw at me. "Stop. What do you want?"

I halted in my tracks. "Is the young man there alright? Have the predators done something to him?"

"Nothing like that," she muttered. "Why should we trust you? You just came with a bunch of *their* soldiers. We saw you go through the checkpoint."

"I'm a high-ranking Gojid officer that was taken prisoner during the war." The words were automatic, as if some other persona jumped behind the wheel. "The second they released me, I'm doing what I can to help…under the circumstances. You might know me; my name is Captain Sovlin."

Her eyes widened. "*The* Sovlin? It's an honor, sir. Um, I'm Berna, and the silent one's Talpin."

"Nice to meet you. May I ask again what the issue is?"

"Tal is deaf. He can't hear any of the predators' commands, and they're starting to get belligerent. We're trying to guide him, but it's a matter of time before they figure it out."

"How long do you think you can keep them in the dark? The humans aren't stupid."

"A few days, at most. But every hour we keep my brother alive is worth it to me."

I studied the deaf Gojid, noticing the confusion plastered across his features. A burning feeling crawled into my throat. The length of Talpin's lower spines suggested that he had just reached adulthood. This teenager had so much of his life ahead of him, and his family circle would mourn his loss immensely.

The UN soldiers were waiting, expecting a full report. Yes, it was a single life to earn the humans' favor; one that would be terminated soon anyways. But there were so many fatalities on my conscience. As it were, that count was more than I could live with.

I couldn't let another person die because of me. Not a single one. The Terrans would resent my disobedience, but any threats paled in

comparison to a novel source of guilt.

“I understand. I suggest that you lay low as possible,” I said with a soft tone. “Take care of yourselves.”

Talpin waved at me, blissfully ignorant to the dilemma in my mind. I shuffled back toward the predators, while a choking sickness clamped down on my stomach. Their hideous eyes searched mine for any clues. Carlos barked a question, but the translated meaning was lost beneath my swirling thoughts.

“Sovlin? Talk to me, buddy.” Anton patted my shoulder, and I flinched at the contact. “You look shaken up. What’s the matter?”

Samantha narrowed her eyes. “What did they tell you? If there’s a threat, we can try to de-escalate the situation. That is part of our training, you know.”

“I’m sorry. N-no one is in danger. But I can’t tell you,” I whimpered.

“What do you mean, ‘You can’t tell us?!’” the female predator hissed.

“Your reaction could be drastic. I can’t get someone else killed…no matter how b-bad I feel about Marcel. Just throw me back in my cell, okay? Please.”

She blinked. “Nobody is getting killed. Have humans ever displayed violence toward you? Either you trust us to conduct ourselves with kindness and compassion, or you haven’t reformed at all. Pick one.”

“I…I don’t know. Shit, I don’t know!”

“Sovlin, we are trying to help these people. You have my word that no harm will befall any of them. Not unless there is zero alternative,” Carlos growled.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Feeling empathy was a far cry from the altruistic disregard of genealogy. Humans wouldn’t be a strong, warrior species without making a few logical sacrifices. It might stupefy them, that we burdened ourselves with so-called debility. Would honor be enough to compel the predator guards to spare Talpin?

The lawyer jostled my arm again. “You’re panicking. I can see that. Whatever predator nonsense you all are convinced of, it’s dead wrong. We are *nothing* like the Arxur.”

“Yes, but…he’s deaf!” I blurted.

The humans recoiled. All of their expressions seemed stunned, from how their eyebrows shot up toward their hairline. I don't think that possibility even crossed their mind. Why would it, when they would never engage in such an impractical undertaking themselves?

Shit, what have I done? You couldn't keep your fat mouth shut, and let a teenager live his final days in peace? I berated myself. *You're a weak-minded, selfish asshole, Sovlin. You should've spaced yourself back on your ship.*

Samantha scratched her head. "Was that so hard? I think I can take care of this."

The UN guards stalked toward the group, and I tailed behind them in mute horror. My brain was screaming at them to stop, but I couldn't muster the words. The self-hatred reached a new high; my will to live felt depleted. Were the predators going to take Talpin away from his family? Execute him in front of the watching crowd?

The female human approached, without drawing her weapon, and gestured toward the deaf youth. Talpin screeched, as he saw the armed predators' attention on him. With bristling spines, he tried to crawl under his bunk. The Gojid cluster gaped at me with looks of absolute betrayal; tears swelled in my eyes.

"How could you, Sovlin?!" Berna jumped between the Terrans and her brother, flexing her claws in defiance. "I thought you were a hero! A man who would die for our planet."

I collapsed to my knees, hugging my chest. "I'm so sorry. I…I trusted them."

"P-please, don't kill him, predators. I'll give you whatever you want!" the sister protested.

Samantha dropped to one leg. "We're not going to hurt anyone. Can he understand me now?"

She made a series of animated gestures, concurrent with her speech. Talpin watched her with a blank stare, trembling. Her clawless fingers curled in strange motions, but they didn't seem random. My misery gave way to confusion, as I tried to understand what she was doing. Was this some non-verbal form of communication?

That's not hunger or disgust in her eyes, I don't think.

"Sign language," Carlos explained, spotting my bafflement. "It's

how deaf people communicate on our planet. Do your translators work on it?"

"N-no. Only audible language; that's why tail s-signals don't translate," I stammered.

The female predator lowered her hands. "Dammit. Please tell him we're going to find a way to talk to him, Gojids. Ask him for a little patience."

Berna gaped at the UN soldiers. "Okay? Thank you."

My mind was spinning. The humans created an entire gesture language for those who lacked hearing? Did that mean that they catered to other ailments too; that individuals like Talpin could live normal lives? This suggested the limits of their nurturing went much farther than I imagined.

The Arxur would have considered any hindered offspring as prey, lumping it in the same category as their food. Then again, they abandoned their children days after birth, whereas Marcel spoke as if humans kept contact with their progeny. With their empathetic behavior toward our younglings, I couldn't imagine they left their kids to fend for themselves.

"I don't understand. You speak a language for deaf people, but you can hear?" I murmured.

Samantha raised her shoulders briefly. "My brother is deaf. Was from birth."

Berna's eyes widened. "Your parents reared a deficient offspring? Reworked their whole lives for it…kept it?"

"What the fuck? Of course they 'kept' him!" she spat.

The Gojid flinched. "S-sorry. Shit, I meant no offense, predator. I thought you'd care about individual contributions."

"There are more ways to enhance society than by being the pinnacle of physical perfection." Anton met my gaze, though replying to Berna. It was like he knew my thoughts followed a similar track. "One of our greatest astrophysicists was a quadriplegic for decades; fully dependent on the care of others, unable to talk without a speech synthesizer. Brilliant man."

I twisted my claws, pondering their words. Though I regretted my behavior toward Marcel, my understanding of humans was limited

to the scope of my prior knowledge. Zarn had spoken in ghastly detail about their cruelty and malice. Our briefing videos encapsulated those heinous acts, and confirmed the unthinkable level of viciousness abiding within them.

Even in Terran domain, all I see is compassion. Where is the humanity that the Federation saw?Wouldn't such a brutish nature shine through, somewhere?

Seeing their redeeming qualities, such as how they were capable of empathy, was a start. However, these primates were nothing at all like any scientist predicted. Predators' entire purpose in an ecosystem was to weed out the weak. They were natural selection itself!

"You're quite right, humans. You are nothing like the Arxur," I admitted.

"We're not. We want you to help us beat them, Sovlin, but the UN needed to see that you trust us first." A hard glint flashed in Carlos' brown eyes. "I'm satisfied that your remorse is genuine. What do you say we spend a few hours here, then we talk shop?"

"That translated as, um, discussing work?"

"Touché. We're drumming up plans to take the fight to the Arxur, and to bring whatever is left of your cradle back into our hands. Would you be willing to look them over? Perhaps serve alongside us?"

I realized that, in spite of my visceral reaction to their features, I almost liked these humans. They had a certain charisma, when they articulated their lofty intentions. Our cradle would be little more than rubble now, but its symbolism counted for something.

A few thousand Gojids might've survived in bunkers, and these strange predators were their last hope. The UN was giving me a chance to offset a fraction of the damage I'd caused. That wasn't the sort of offer I could pass up.

"There's nothing I'd like more. Count me in."

Chapter 30

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 3, 2136

Accompanying Marcel to visit his tormentor was my overarching desire, but persuading the predator proved an impossible task. It baffled me why he believed this confrontation was something he needed to tackle alone. The worry I felt for my human was tremendous; I couldn't imagine how traumatic it was to encounter Sovlin, with the roles reversed.

Beyond that, it was terrifying to be stranded on Earth, without him to protect me. Whenever something frightened me, there was the comforting assurance that the vegetarian would fix it. I was beginning to understand that Marcel shielded me from the predatory side of humanity, to the best of his ability. Who was there to filter the stimuli around me now?

You need to get used to humans on your own, Slanek. Toughen up, I chided myself. *That orphan toddler is twice as brave as you!*

Nulia seemed anxious without her scarred predator; the poor thing must be fearful of being abandoned again. Tyler landed babysitting duty for the Gojid child, while her guardian was away. The meat-eater had finally retired to his room, trying to get both of them some shut-eye.

As babyish as it would have been, I wished I tagged along. Every shadow that danced on the wall seemed like a dog sneaking up on me. There was no chance of getting a wink of sleep, knowing I was trapped in a land of predators alone. How could any sane species leave their varmint alive?

With a frustrated sigh, I jabbed a claw on the remote. It was a bad idea to watch their television without supervision, but the boredom was stirring up the dark side of my imagination regardless. The screen opposite the bed flickered to life, set to a news channel by default. A stern-looking female had her intense, predatory eyes fixed on the camera.

"…ever trust the Federation?" she asked. "None of their information about predators has been correct. The continued survival of the human race is due to their astonishing incompetence; their

fundamental lack of curiosity. You, your children, and your loved ones are vermin to be killed to them. These aliens take offense to your existence."

"Not the Venlil!" I yipped, knowing that she couldn't hear me.

"The UN ambassador and the Venlil governor never returned, from a summit where they tried to negotiate with these genocidal maniacs. At this point, we have to presume that Noah Williams was murdered. Maybe it's time to give the Feds a dose of the predators they're asking for. Is this why the Arxur turned on them? How were they really treated at first contact?"

That statement made my blood boil. How could any human argue with the mountain of footage, depicting Arxur sadism? It was an undisputed fact that the Federation uplifted those predators, gifting the means to blaze a trail of destruction. Hadn't the Terran soldiers returned with stories of the grays rounding up cattle, and snacking on living Gojids mid-battle?

Surely, no humans bought this outrageous line of thinking. This had to be a sensationalist take to garner publicity for her broadcast. That, or it was satire. I failed to see the humor, but then again, I always took a literal interpretation of things. Terran comedy could be pretty dark and tasteless, from the jokes I heard on my deployment.

"Nothing excuses cannibalism and xenocide, to those who will inevitably take my words out of context. I just don't see a reason to accept a bigot's narrative, without any critical thinking. Recent intelligence suggests ship movement in the Krakotl…"

The hotel door clicked open without warning, which startled me upright. What if it was UN security guards, coming to secure my room with a dog? That creature was going to be my nightmare fuel for months; I could vividly picture it ripping off a Venlil limb, with a toss of its ugly head.

My fear morphed to relief as I saw it was Marcel, who bore an exhausted look on his face. The predator's emotions must be depleted, after such a taxing journey. He flopped back-first on the bed, allowing the residual tension to ebb from his shoulders. I assaulted him with a hug, and ignored the groan as I knocked the wind out of him.

“Easy, buddy,” the human grunted. “It’s only been a day!”

I emitted a happy mewl, as he settled me onto his chest with his uninjured arm. The room’s dark environment felt much brighter, with my friend to shepherd me. Nothing could harm me when he was around; not even a dog. The human tickled my chin with a low chuckle, and I rested my paws atop his stomach.

My eyes met his piercing gaze. “I was worried sick about you. How did it go? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I…I think I’m ready to move forward,” he replied. “But I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s talk about something else, alright?”

“Sure. How about what kind of predators humans are?”

“Shit, Slanek. Do we have to discuss that now? It’s 1 in the morning __”

“Yes, we do. You promised, and I think I deserve the truth. It’s like you don’t trust me, even after all we’ve been through together.”

Marcel searched my expression, a mix of concern and affection in his eyes. The human seemed reluctant to answer. His fear of losing me was palpable, from how his fingers tightened around my fur. What could be so sinister that it would alter my view of him, after all this time? I trusted him with my life; if my stupid instincts didn’t get in the way, I would take a bullet for him.

“It’s complicated,” he growled, after several seconds of silence. “Humans have employed every predation strategy in the book. Like Tyler said, dogs have helped us. We’ve set traps, used ambush tactics, fished, raised livestock…yes, I know you hate that word. But you asked.”

I tilted my head. “You said you weren’t ambush predators.”

“We’re versatile. Anyhow, what people claim we are, is one of the oldest hunting strategies known to mankind. It’s called persistence hunting.”

The human paused, as though expecting a dramatic reaction. My blank stare seemed to disappoint him; his lips curved downward even further. I could tell how much he disliked this topic, but we had already gotten this far.

Is that ‘persistence hunting’ phrase supposed to mean something to me?

“Continue? I don’t get it,” I pressed.

“Humans possess a high endurance, because of our sweating ability. We can run a lot longer…especially in the hot climates we originated in.” Marcel closed his eyes, unable to meet my gaze. “We were never faster than our prey. We just had more stamina. We chased them until they stopped running.”

A chill ran down my spine, as I processed the meaning of those words. Was he telling me that humans pursued their prey for *hours*… maybe even days? That they never tired, or gave up on a pursuit? Such an ordeal meant their quarry had an eternity to contemplate their demise. The victim spent their last day in a desperate, agonized flight. Their terror lasted much longer than the split second of an ambush.

My brain began to imagine running from a human, feeling the burning of my muscles and my lungs. The savage predator would draw closer, every time I paused to rest or dampened my pace. Knowing all the while that the second my legs gave out, my death was a certainty. There was no hope of escape, short of confronting the hunter.

What an awful way to go. Having your own body betray you, and languishing in a pool of chemical exhaustion. The predator would slowly approach, bloodlust in its eyes, signifying the end…I thought humans showed mercy? They conducted themselves like reasonable, kind, and feeling people; not relentless beasts that inflicted torment on the weak.

Tears streamed down my face, at the thought of my human partaking in that sort of predation. It felt awful, to think of him in that regard. If he was born a few thousand years ago, would he have chased helpless creatures through the scorching heat too? Was that what was coded in his instincts?

“Slanek? Gosh, you’re shaking.” Marcel rubbed my ear comfortingly. “Say something, please. Even if it’s that you hate me.”

Sadness seeped onto his expression, which knocked some sense back into me. It was painful to see how heartbroken he looked. I resisted the urge to swat his hand away, and attempted to regain my wits. The predator’s honesty was admirable, when he foretold precisely how I would react. I knew, in my soul, that my human would never dream of harming me.

It was time to stop fixating on their heritage, as much as anything

predatory frightened my instincts. Humanity left their gruesome past behind, and had proven themselves more than capable of empathy. My reactions were the product of a stupid, irrational phobia. I wanted to love them fully, without awful thoughts creeping into my head all the time.

“O…okay. P-persistence. Got it,” I stammered.

The human blinked. “What?”

“I accept you, f-for whatever you are, because I care about you. No matter what.”

The predator clutched me tighter, and restrained his own tears. It was important for Marcel to know that he didn’t have to apologize for his existence. After wrestling with wretched self-doubts, my acceptance was essential for his mental welfare. Humans didn’t need to alter themselves to prove they were worthy of our friendship.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Keep it between us, please. I’ll get in trouble for telling you.”

I flicked my ears. “Okay. That is an awful form of predation, which doesn’t exist on our world, so I get why you avoided the subject. But Tarva deserves to know. She would still stand by you; I’m certain.”

“I’d hope the governor would take heart, knowing the fruit our roots have borne. We just do the best with what we have in our toolset. Humans are survivors; whatever it takes, we have the resolve and the dedication.”

“How is that encouraging in any way, Marc?”

“Maybe it will help you to realize the lengths we would go for you, our Venlil friends. And you’ll know that we will hunt the Arxur to the ends of the universe; that there will be nowhere they can hide. We’ll battle a scourge like that as long as our species survives.”

Marcel’s argument was persuasive enough, when he phrased it like that. The Terran pledge to liberate sentient farm worlds, and all of their military aspirations, felt much more feasible. An arduous war wouldn’t daunt humanity like it did for us.

I suppose there was another positive to their hunting methodology, in that it wasn’t a deceptive art. They had no reason to employ

trickery, or extend a hand in a false friendship. This could be conveyed as a reason to trust humanity, if they played their cards right.

“You should get one of the UN people to ‘tell me.’ You’ll need to be more tactful with most Venlil; framing is everything.” I pinned my ears against my head, trying to keep a storm of negative emotions at bay. “I can think of a way to make your ancestry more palatable. Maybe just say you can withstand heat better, so you’re desert pursuit predators. Or shift the focus to your recent cattle practices.”

“Er, I’m not sure a close examination of factory farms is a good idea either. Never mind that. You took that better than I expected, by far, Slanek.”

“I want to stop panicking, but I don’t know how. My kneejerk reactions aren’t what I really think, once my brain comes around. But sometimes…usually, I can’t control it! You deserve a better friend.”

I ducked my head, feeling shame roll down my spine. Despite my constant efforts, my brain refused to forget that these lumbering primates were predators. My subconscious reminded me at every turn that humans weren’t like us, and that they could morph into feral beasts at any second. Marcel did deserve so much better.

All that time he wastes comforting me, and trying to calm me down. I’m a burden. A loser.

“Are you kidding? I got paired with the best Venlil.” Marcel offered his signature snarl, which was menacing yet gentle. “I wanted to be a part of the first contact program so bad. Do you know how many questions we had to answer?”

“30? 50? How many?”

“200, plus an in-person interview, a background check, and a psychological exam. All of my communications were analyzed since first contact, for any red flags. What was your selection process like?”

“I volunteered.”

“Um, right. I’m sure there weren’t a lot of takers for your position,” the red-haired human chuckled. “There was no guarantee that my partner would get past seeing me. You know from the stories around the outpost that some people didn’t.”

That was a true statement. Several Venlil fainted once in proximity of their penpals, and were taken to the infirmary. A smaller minority abandoned the program altogether, due to meeting their Terran counterparts.

I remembered how my fear had been almost painful that first day. It was no wonder a few Venlil found the humans too intimidating for cohabitation. Still, I couldn't imagine how those predators felt, being rejected on sight after weeks of chatting.

The worst horror story was a Venlil that panicked at a human stepping into her room, and leapt into self-defense mode. She grabbed the nearest sharp object, which was a pair of scissors, and plunged it into the Terran's shoulder. Her partner, while wounded, was able to wrestle the blade from her claws; the violence was not returned. The predator didn't press charges, for some reason, despite Venlil government's offer to prosecute.

Meanwhile, Marcel and I shared potato chips on our first day. Not the worst pairing he could've had, I suppose?

"Anyways. I talked to Lucy, you know, my fiancé, on the ride here. She wants me to come home, but I've gotten used to having you around." Marcel took a deep breath, scratching his stubbly scalp. "Ah, maybe it's not the right time to ask, after what I just told you."

"No, I'm calm now. Go on."

"How would you feel about living with us? You can come and go as you please. Any time you want to return to Venlil Prime, you don't have to stay. But we'll take care of all of your expenses, whenever you want to be here."

I gaped at him. The idea of a permanent residence with my human filled my chest with warmth, but Earth was as alien as any world could get. A trial period was all I could commit to, to see how I handled prolonged exposure to a predatory environment. Would the UN…or technically, the regional government be okay with my staying?

"Er, I'll think about it. Does that mean you're going to receive a military discharge?"

"No. But I've requested a transfer home, so I can live planetside. I'll only be involved with the defense of Earth, should that be necessary."

“And what about Nulia? She needs you more than I do. She’d be devastated if she ends up in a camp, alone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We’re going to adopt her. I already spoke with Meier about the necessary paperwork, and he’s going to contact the American State Department. They’re starting from scratch on that one, I think.”

The Gojid child would be elated. I wondered how being raised by predators would impact her development, but I knew she’d grow up in a loving environment. It was obvious the human considered her to be his own daughter, and would care for her accordingly. There wasn’t a more touching tale, than to witness these pursuit hunters rescuing the children of a species that swore to destroy Earth.

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out… Mawsle,” I whispered.

“Why, you fluffy little shit!” The human glowered at me, while I feigned ignorance. “Don’t you dare start that, too! I can and *will* rescind my offer.”

I wagged my tail. “Too late. No takebacks.”

My family back on Venlil Prime would say I was suicidal to accept; but the more I thought about his proposition, the more enticing it seemed. Navigating humanity’s diplomatic hurdles, helping a predator raise a prey child, and protecting their planet from harm could be my new calling. Maybe one day, Earth would even feel like my home.

At any rate, free rent sounded pretty darn good to my ears.

Chapter 31

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 3, 2136

In a half-day, our ship would reach the edge of Republic space, and we'd be able to transmit communications back to our UN contacts. The Terrans had been slated to open an embassy on Venlil Prime, a few days after our original departure. That meant they would have a full diplomatic staff on world, and would be available to help humans abroad.

Many Terran nations requested their own embassies, so they could conduct their affairs as separate entities. While I liked the predators, I wasn't giving out an absurd 198 embassies, versus every other species' singular site. Humans were welcome to bicker amongst themselves about who could send their own diplomatic corps, and how to divide the turf, if they must.

I had no interest in making their discordance my business. My focus was on smoothing over both of our relations with the Federation. It was also a priority to stabilize my friend's mental health, especially after weeks of isolation and boredom. Learning how the human mind coped with stress would be useful down the road.

After careful consideration of the astronaut's mannerisms, I decided there was no major cause for alarm. All of our research showed that humans were highly social creatures. Ambassador Noah perked up just from having new conversation partners at hand.

A few days to unwind, in the company of his own people, and he'd be begging to get back into the field. He only needed to "recharge his batteries", as the Terrans said.

Noah's excelled in quite an uncomfortable position. Volunteering with the belief that he would be a martyr. Standing in as a representative for his whole species. That kind of pressure has to pile up.

"…in conclusion, the International Space Station proved that humanity can cooperate in the stars." The predator was finishing a story I'd heard before; he had a rapt audience in our Mazic passenger. "That scientists see our beautiful Earth differently from above. The ISS was our first foothold off-world. It paved the path

for lunar colonies, and set a precedent of joint exploration."

"So then, why has your planet still not united under a single banner, Noah? You do not care for distant members of your species without a, shall I say, stellar view?" came the scoffing response.

When President Cupo's question reached my ears, I was concerned that other diplomats would voice similar concerns. The Mazic still seemed leery of the human, despite being thrice the weight of the predator. No offense to Noah, but I'm pretty sure the beige prey-animal could knock him out with a stamp of his flat paw, easily.

Humanity's internal divisions were a disquieting issue, to the galaxy as a whole. The newcomers seemed to be trying to work up the courage to ask about it for days. With the external threat of predation in our formative years, prey species had to maintain unity. Cooperation was our bread and fruit spread, so to speak. Indulging in petty squabbles would've gotten us killed.

I'd seen several exit interviews with various leaders, before we left signal range of Aafa. Many dissenters cited Earth's disputes as proof that the predators were incapable of cooperation. It was their main evidence that the primates were still warlike and disagreeable.

"Humans evolved in a lot of small tribes, which later became nation-states. These each have their own distinct culture: beliefs, music, stories, cuisine, and languages," the Terran ambassador replied, leaning back in his seat. "It would be losing a part of our heritage to renounce that…and because of our differing viewpoints, we don't always agree on how things should be done."

Cupo flared his trunk. "But why can you not maintain your practices, under a common entity? You claim freedom of beliefs are a core value."

"It would be like you unifying with the Nevoks. You may like each other plenty, perhaps you are even allies, but you would not abide by the same jurisdiction. We have common forums, alliances, and trade agreements…so Nikonus was quite mistaken, in thinking we do not speak the language of diplomacy. We work together when it matters."

It didn't escape my notice that Tossa, the Nevok representative, was watching with interest. The Sivkit, Zurulian, and Yotul occupants were also observing the exchange. None of them were being subtle,

with how their ears were swiveled toward the predator. The other Federation diplomats had flown with Recel in a separate ship, too daunted to embark on a human-infested vessel.

Cupo was just the only one bold enough to voice what they all are thinking. Now, the floodgates are open, I thought. *I better be ready to intervene, if Noah gets overwhelmed.*

"Predator Noah, please forgive my impertinence." Laulo, the Yotul diplomat, spoke in a measured tone. The uplift had given the human a wide berth, but at least was able to meet his startling gaze. "Do humans still fight wars when you, um, disagree?"

"Sometimes. One always hopes those quarrels can be resolved with words. Rest assured, a common threat, like the Arxur, should place any of our lingering disputes on the back burner."

The Federation representatives looked baffled by that answer. As I learned early on, the national affairs of Earth were a complex matter. It was imprudent to deal with any nation individually, since that could be construed as favoritism. Most of the humans' rhetoric was posturing, but they were always locked in jealous competition.

It was strange how human tribes perceived their interests as separate. They had much more in common than divided them, and they even seemed to recognize their folly when asked. It was one of several areas I had pointed out to renowned neuroscientist Ilja for closer study.

"I suspect a human's temper can run much hotter, much quicker than ours," Chauson offered, in a matter-of-fact tone. "None of my research suggests their end goal is loss of life. It is just the result of aggression. Their predatory inclination is to deal with a perceived threat through violence, rather than fleeing."

"Er, not fully accurate, doc. Humans have a fight *or* flight response," Noah growled. "We can panic or freeze, just like you. It varies from person to person, and what temperament they have. Some of us are wholly incapable of aggression."

A contemplative silence fell over our entourage, and Chauson scribbled something in his sketchbook. The last tidbit was news to me too. I assumed aggression was part of every predator's natural makeup, since that ferocity facilitated their ancestors' survival.

Were there really some humans as timid and anxious as us? That

cowered at threats like Venlil?

If so, it was obvious Noah was not one of those humans. While the ambassador was skilled at masking his emotions, hostility seeped through whenever he saw the Venlil threatened. Its source was almost paternal. The look in his eyes at first contact, when he watched the grays tormenting our pups, was apoplectic.

Lots of compassionate humans were angry when they saw those videos. I wish we were home, so the Federation could meet the volunteer doctors and aid workers. It's been too—

A rattling noise hummed through the ship walls, jolting me out of my thoughts. This time, it was more insistent than its previous occurrences throughout the journey. There was no reason a ship which deployed a year ago should experience issues, but it roused some worries nonetheless.

"Hey, Tarva? Not to stir up panic, but is that grating sound normal?" the Terran ambassador asked.

Something felt…off with the shuttle, since it took flight. The predator's unease validated my suspicions. I was inclined to propose further investigation, even though we were one territory away from home. The last thing we needed was to be stranded in space, with a bunch of skittish diplomats and an inoperable ship.

I tilted my head. "No, it's not. I'm going to run a ship diagnostic, just to be safe."

Laulo raised a peach-colored paw. "It's coming from the cooling shaft. We should take a look there."

"As if you know," Tossa scoffed. "I'd hardly trust your ilk to fix a sailboat! The printing press is a novelty to you primitives."

"Were your ancestors born with spaceships?" Noah glowered at her, and the Nevok froze under his ocular intensity. "I didn't know we were graced by the presence of a species, who were endowed with divine knowledge!"

Tossa quivered, her icy fur raising along her hackles. "W-we found our way on our own. We d-didn't have everything handed to us!"

"The Yotul would have learned on their own, with time. *You* interfered in their natural development, so that they could join your war!"

“Are you daft, predator? The Arxur don’t give a grain stalk about natural development.”

“And neither do you, with your insensitive and tone-deaf comments. How the fuck did you become a diplomat?”

Laulo looked aghast at the predator’s vehement defense of his species. I think he assumed that the ambassador didn’t know the Yotul’s origins, but it was obvious the human had done his homework. The marsupial was likely surprised that the Terran would side with him. Especially when he was accustomed to verbal beatdowns from fellow diplomats.

It was apparent that Noah had lost all patience with the vitriolic rhetoric toward the uplift. Tossa’s condescension, singling the Yotul out at every turn, rubbed my friend the wrong way. However noble his outburst, the last thing we needed was for him to alienate an influential ally. The Nevoks could be a crucial supplier of resources and ship parts to Earth.

Axsely, the Sivkit representative, was sobbing from the primate’s raised voice. She had yet to speak a word to Noah, only introducing herself to the rest of us while he was asleep. A shouting match wasn’t the way to calm her nerves either.

“Stop it, both of you!” I hissed. “Every second we spend bickering, the Arxur win. Let’s be respectful to each other, alright?”

The human drew a shuddering breath. “My apologies, Governor. I’m not the type to stand idle while someone else is mocked and bullied.”

“It’s not mockery, predator. I’m merely stating facts,” Tossa said.

“My name is not predator. It’s Noah, Ambassador Williams, or if that’s too fucking difficult, I’ll settle for human!”

“Uh, sorry about that,” Laulo muttered.

The human snorted. “You’re fine. At least you used my name.”

The Nevok curled her lip. “Predator is just a word, which does describe you. You’re too defensive, *Noah*.”

“So you can pronounce it! Fascinating.”

Despite my best efforts, the two of them were still at each other’s throats. Whoever managed Terran relations with the Nevok Imperium, it couldn’t involve Noah in any way. The human was so

incensed by his counterpart's attitude, that he hadn't noticed Axsely balling up into a fetal position. I believed he would've backed down if he realized the fright his ire had caused.

"Not another word!" I swished my tail in frustration. "Noah, you are coming with me, alone, and that's not up for discussion. I'm going to run a diagnostic, and we'll see if Laulo's intuition is correct."

The Terran ambassador opened his mouth to argue, but then followed my pupils toward the sniveling Sivkit. His expression softened, replaced by a worried furrow of his brow. That agitation might've undone any progress with the Mazic too. President Cupo had inched away from the human, and was trying to comfort Axsely with soothing words. The timid female was unresponsive, rocking back and forth.

At least our Zurulian friend seemed to enjoy that, I mused. *Chauson was trying to be the ship stenographer, during that whole exchange!*

Noah lowered his gaze, and strode over to me with dejection. The predator risked a glance over his shoulder, making eye contact with Laulo. The marsupial mouthed his gratitude, and the Terran's posture relaxed. He gave the Yotul a slight nod of acknowledgement, before shuffling into the cockpit.

I hovered by the ship computer, pulling up the troubleshooting module. It would take several seconds to complete a cursory scan, which would give Noah's temper time to blow over. I hoped that nothing was amiss with the vessel. The implications of a defect would be unpleasant.

"I didn't scare you, did I, Tarva?" Noah murmured.

I snorted. "No. I'm just trying to stop Earth's foreign relations from imploding on week one. For the sake of argument, let's say you piss off the Nevoks. The Federation will parade them around, using them as proof that you can't be allies with humanity."

"And then, we lose the undecided votes."

"Exactly. There is too much at stake, for all of us."

A soft beep indicated that the diagnostic was complete, and we returned our attention to the computer. A holographic avatar of the shuttle zoomed in to the ship's underbelly. It highlighted a long pipe in blinking red; an autogenerated note indicated that cooling

fluid was leaking. The shaft was nestled right next to the warp drive, so it didn't take an engineer to figure its purpose.

That part of the ship was only accessible from the exterior; fixing it would require a spacewalk. My immediate suspicion was that someone had tampered with the vessel. Mainly because the pipe leaked just enough, that it wouldn't cause immediate alarm…or breakdown in range of the Kolshian surveillance team. But who would have sabotaged us? What was their motive?

"So it was the cooling system," the human said calmly. "Stop the ship. I'll get a vac suit, and try to patch her up."

I flicked my ears. "No. You need to stay here and keep an eye on everyone."

"Why?"

"I suspect foul play. Deliberate damage. If it's one of the species on board, they could be trying to lure you off the ship. That way, they can take all of us out, without having to fight a predator."

Noah squinted in confusion. It was refreshing that the ambassador didn't panic at the first hint of danger; his reaction was cool and calculating. The human lacked a full understanding of the situation, and I suspected he disliked the uncertainty more than the peril.

"That makes zero sense. Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know. That's what I want to find out. If our vessel went missing in no man's land, with all of humanity's allies on board, you know who would foot the blame."

He frowned. "Always me, isn't it?"

I flicked my ears in acknowledgment; Noah shook his head in disgust. Unfortunately, humanity had no shortage of enemies within the Federation. The two of us needed to talk it over, and work out anyone who could have a possible angle. Ruling out the five species on board was our top priority, since they would be an immediate threat.

Of course, it could be someone on Recel's ship. I wonder if they ran into any trouble, or if this was only targeted at the human, I thought.

"I don't know where to start." I slammed a paw on the console, stressed at the prospect of ship-wide interrogation. "There could be any number of parties involved; someone inside or outside our

group. An ally or an enemy. How do we even begin to narrow the field?"

"Let's start with who we think it couldn't be," Noah growled. "Can we clear anyone on this ship? Someone we can account for, or are almost certain they're fine?"

"I trust Chauson."

"Really? I don't know about him."

"He's never been unkind to you, which is saying a lot."

"That's exactly why he's suspicious, Tarva. He's too nice. What if he's up to something?"

"The Zurulians were the only ones to reach out before the vote. Also, as you know, we do an awful job controlling our instincts. Chauson couldn't fake not being afraid of a predator; he pranced up to you while his head was dripping blood."

The ambassador tapped his foot a few times, and a touch of relief flickered in his brown eyes. It saddened me that mistreatment was so commonplace for him, that normal interaction triggered alarm bells in his head. The Zurulian scientist was the only person I'd seen attempt to squash his instincts, in his first meeting with a human.

If we trusted Chauson, bringing him into the loop might not be the worst idea. Three minds were better than two, and he was intelligent enough not to jump to conclusions. Besides, someone needed to mend the cooling shaft damage. I would volunteer, except that with my technical knowhow, I was more likely to make the warp core spontaneously combust.

The fewer people know the true reason for our predicament, the better. Let's hope Chauson can keep his mouth shut, when asked.

Sharing my suspicions with the entire ship would only incite panic, and lead to in-fighting and accusations. Knowing how paranoid some species were about predators, they would find a way to blame Noah. Because obviously, the nefarious human would cripple his ride home, after weeks of imprisonment, for some illusory goal. It made perfect sense, if you didn't think about it.

I sighed. "Do not tell anyone, anything, other than that we're fixing a minor problem. I'm going to fetch Chauson."

The human nodded. If anyone could sniff out deceit, it would be an

observant predator like Noah. One way or another, we were going to get to the bottom of this debacle. I suppose it was too much to ask, for these introductions to be smooth sailing, and for Earth to attain some genuine allies without any hiccups.

When I ascertained the responsible party, they were going to receive some harsh retribution, courtesy of the human-Venlil alliance.

Chapter 32

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 4, 2136

The shuttle halted a few parsecs short of Venlil space, until the necessary repairs were complete. This delay tacked hours to our travel time, but none of the other options were reasonable. If the drive overheated, the ensuing explosion would bring about our swift demise. I wondered how the passengers reacted to our sudden stop, and my refusal to explain any details.

Chauson hadn't taken any convincing to come to our aid, even after he processed the murky truth. He was pacing back and forth now, pink tongue lolling out of his mouth. With his quadrupedal stature, the Zurulian barely surpassed the human's knee. Noah was biting his lip, and I assumed the predator was holding back a reaction to the "adorable" scientist.

Now was not the time to divulge that wrinkle to our new friend. Especially when that furry guy was the potential ally we were most optimistic about. I sorted through the shape-conforming vac suits, picking out one designed for small quadrupeds. Strong magnets fixed a standardized toolbox to one sleeve; serving on a few science vessels prepared Chauson for basic repairs.

"Thanks again for helping us. Do you think this is something you can handle?" I asked.

"I'll do my best, Tarva." The Zurulian wiggled into the suit, baring his teeth in discomfort. The fabric must feel restricting in all the wrong places. "We only need it to hold together long enough to get a few parsecs. Let's just try to minimize the stress on the warp drive."

"Slow and steady," I confirmed. "Oh, and remember, this is our secret. We don't want anyone else getting wind of this."

"You really think it's someone here? Why would they damage a ship they're on, with a, um…"

Noah rolled his arboreal eyes. "Predator. It's okay. You can say it."

Chauson winced. "Yeah. I don't see the logic of that plan."

“If everyone were logical, this all would’ve been much easier,” I responded. “It’s just a possibility, for now. Honestly, it’s more likely that it’s someone outside this group. But some people would sacrifice themselves, in a heartbeat, to ‘fight flesh-eating monstrosities.’”

“I can feel the love,” the human growled.

“You’d be better off to seek respect, rather than *love*.” Chauson struggled with his headgear, fumbling with the clip. “Love can be quite the fleeting emotion, you know.”

The quadruped flicked his ears with annoyance, and Noah helped him click the helmet into place. Those opposable thumbs were more useful than most species’ toes and claws. I was impressed by how fast the Terran picked up on alien nonverbal cues, given how little he had actually been told.

The Zurulian gave the tether on his chest a final tug, ensuring it was fastened. He shimmied into the crawl space, and there was a click as the emergency airlock unsealed. Left alone with me, Noah’s composition dissolved. A smile tugged at his lips, and he allowed a fawning look into his gaze.

“Seeing Chauson dressed up in a spacesuit, with those little teddy bear ears…Tarva, my heart feels real fuzzy,” the ambassador declared.

Amusement flared within my sternum. “No clue what a ‘teddy bear’ is. I guess Venlil aren’t cute to you anymore, if we’ve been replaced so easily.”

“Don’t go getting all jealous on me, now. Am I not allowed to think the entire galaxy is cute?”

“You think the Arxur are cute?”

“Damn you! You know that wasn’t what I meant.”

“You said the entire—”

“I know what I said. And honestly, maybe baby Arxur are cute. We think pretty much *any* youngling is cute, even the mean or ugly ones.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me. You’re really doubling down on that?”

“I am. What are you gonna do about it?”

A chuckle trilled from my chest, picturing the predator cooing at baby reptilians. That would be stretching their nurturing instincts a little too far for my liking. Humans' fierce protectiveness of their offspring was something I noticed in their earliest transmissions. It would be interesting to meet a little primate; despite their eyes, their innocence and enthusiasm looked endearing.

It's wonderful that Noah and I's friendship is so easygoing, and that we can mess around now. He would've apologized for the implication before this trip, instead of recognizing that I was kidding.

I gave the human a playful headbutt. "I'm going to make us focus on potential culprits. We need to go over the list of species onboard, pronto. With any luck, we can clear most of them. Maybe all of them."

"Fine." Noah's grin dissolved, and the teasing edge leapt from his intonation. "Let's start with the Mazic. Even as a reluctant ally, I doubt he'll ever like me."

It was tough to reconcile President Cupo's ridicule during Noah's speech, with the potential of friendship. The human had attempted to brush any past incidents off, fielding his critical questions on our voyage with aplomb. At least the Mazic was touching on genuine topics, and listening to the given responses.

Still, mistrust flowed from Cupo at every turn. He stated himself that his vote stemmed from the Federation's desperation against the Arxur alone. There was little more dangerous than a man with nothing left to lose. Not to mention, that Noah's first thought was that the President was only partaking in this foray to stir up trouble.

The Mazics would be my prime suspect, if it weren't for the fact that their figurehead was present in the flesh. Surely a planetary leader would send a stand-in to carry out devious plans. Why would he cause disruption to his planet's governance, other than as a show of good faith?

"Cupo came himself," I replied. "It would be like me going on a suicide mission. I wouldn't be the first candidate the Venlil proposed."

"Leadership is important, I suppose, but that isn't a full exoneration. Ugh, alright, what about the Nevoks?"

“You’re just picking the ones you don’t like first.”

“So what if I am?”

The Nevok representative put on quite the performance for the predator, perhaps with the belief that playing up her derision would impress him. Tossa’s haughtiness had the opposite effect, though. Her ability to quarrel with Noah suggested either she was brave, or the heated dislike was mutual. Predetermined hate was a fine motive to ensure human diplomacy failed.

However, the Nevok government had more to gain from trade than most other species. The Terrans would be creating more ships than anyone, in their rush to fortify their fleet. A lucrative defense contract could keep them sated for years; war was profitable for manufacturing powers.

“I think Tossa dislikes Laulo more than you,” I snorted. “The Nevok Imperium are using you for economic benefit, if you hadn’t already figured that out. They don’t accomplish anything from getting us all stranded in space.”

Noah scratched his chin. “But what if they did get something? What if someone like the Krakotl paid them off?”

“While the Nevoks *could* be bribed, their price would be steep enough that you could buy a whole colony instead. If I were an outside actor, I’d do it myself, or find a cheaper entity to do my bidding.”

“It doesn’t have to be their government, Tarva. It could be a rogue actor; a single person who was swayed, and broke with official policy. We don’t have to assign blame to an entire species.”

“Sure. But I think you just want it to be the Nevoks, so that you can gag their diplomat.”

“That is a baseless accusation.”

“Right…I’m going to move on. That just leaves the Sivkit and the Yotul.”

It would be simpler to make a determination about Axsely, if we had gotten more than a sentence out of her this whole trip. She displayed more skittishness than the rest of us combined. What if that extreme terror stemmed from concerns of the predator catching her treachery? That, or her pre-existing fear had driven her to act

against humanity.

However, her open cowardice didn't mesh with the profile of a martyr or fanatic. I'd expect a little more hatred and reproach from such an enemy, after witnessing the sadistic behavior of Sovlin. Though it was a long shot, it would satisfy me if the humans captured that officer during their war. I wouldn't blame the UN for executing the Gojid on the spot.

If Sovlin somehow survived, I'd want him tried in our courts, for throwing a wounded Venlil in a filthy cage, with a predator. Not that Marcel was ever going to eat Slanek, but that was the captain's intent. That's attempted murder.

Noah tilted his head. "Right now, the only thing the Sivkits are guilty of is a poor choice of personnel."

"That's a bit harsh. Everyone copes with fear differently." I pinned my ears against my head, recalling how disastrous first contact was. "My diplomatic advisor passed out at your initial smile, but now, he loves humans. Axsely might warm up to you too."

"Axsely?"

"That's her name."

"Gotcha. Now, onto the Yotul."

I sensed the marsupial was Noah's favorite. That said, of the species onboard, uplifts had the most to gain from a ploy. Outfoxing a predator was the ultimate display of intellect; it would be the swiftest way to silence any "primitive" jabs. This sabotage could be a calculated risk, to garner respect from some Federation peers.

Come to think of it, Laulo was the one who blurted out that the cooling shaft was the culprit. The fact that it was just as he said was an oddity of itself. That he hadn't wavered, while being discredited and badgered by his colleagues, was even stranger. Either the Yotul had familiarized himself with mechanical knowledge to impress the human, or he had known about the pipe's defectiveness prior.

That alone is pretty incriminating. I'm surprised I didn't catch onto that sooner.

The puzzling bit was why Laulo would offer that information, if he was responsible. Someone who was setting up a drive explosion shouldn't want that problem rectified, before it paid dividends. The

uplift might've known that a diagnostic would reveal the issue, and decided to cut his losses. He could always move onto Plan B.

My tail drooped between my legs. "How did the Yotul know what the issue was, immediately?"

"Well, just because he's an uplift doesn't mean he's an idiot."

"I didn't say that, Noah. Every other passenger, including myself, and you, had no idea. We've been around ships our whole adult lives."

"It could be a lucky guess. Maybe Laulo's studying to be a mechanic. We haven't talked about our personal aspirations."

"Even then, there wasn't a trace of doubt. He stated it as fact, not preceded by an 'I think' clause. It was like he *knew* he was right."

The predator was quiet, and I sensed him replaying the exact words in his head. Noah's disappointment was obvious. Protecting the Yotul was the most passion I'd seen from the ambassador since his desperate plea on the Federation floor. Humanity would love to take a fledgling species under their wing, and explore the galaxy together.

My friend cursed, and slammed his fist into a wall. The human bent over at once, clutching that hand to his stomach. His binocular eyes were narrowed to slits, while his teeth were on full display. His uncontrolled breathing was animalistic, punctuated by furious grunts.

Was the Terran still in control, during this fit of predatory rage? My instincts shadowed my consciousness for the first time in awhile; I'd never seen sweet Noah like this. It took all of my willpower to step forward, and place a shaking paw on his arm.

"You're hurting yourself more than the wall," I squeaked. "It doesn't feel pain."

"I know that." His lips twitched, as he nursed his injured hand. "But fuck! I don't want it to be Laulo. The Yotul were a newer species, who don't have historic prejudices against us."

"We don't know it's him. Let's not overreact."

"But you were right. It doesn't make sense how he knew, with such confidence, from that one sound. Why is the whole galaxy so unfair? Everyone is so fucking hateful!"

Silence was my answer, as much as I wanted to offer soothing words. I didn't know how to handle an angry human, or at what point they presented a threat to those around them. It was possible that my intended response would exacerbate the problem; trusting Noah to calm down on his own might be best.

I took a deep breath, and turned my back to the furious human. It felt wrong to leave myself unguarded, at least while he was in attack mode. Forcing my eyes open, I searched through a mini-fridge. There was no ice, but hopefully, a cold water pouch would suffice. The burning in my chest eased once I stood upright, and the predator was back in my vision.

My claws wrapped around Noah's wrist, clueing me into his racing pulse. The ambassador allowed me to move the aching hand, and it slackened in my grip. I gently pressed the water container to his knuckles. At least that would ease any physical pain.

"Thanks, Tarva. Uh, sorry for blowing up in your face." The human's dilated eyes met mine for a moment, before he looked away. "I have your support, don't I?"

"Always," I whispered.

"Good. Now let's get back to the others, before Cupo barges in here, asking a million questions. Chauson's going to be awhile."

"We're not going to detain Laulo, or at least interrogate him?"

"If I tie up the Yotul now, how are the others going to react? My explanation won't matter. This needs to be handled quietly. It's better to act somewhere that we're in complete control."

"Fair point. I can pull him off to the side when we land on Venlil Prime."

The predator offered his uninjured hand, and I accepted it with an eye roll. Mischief played in his brown irises, as his fingers intertwined with my claws. One nail tickled the fur right under my paw pad, which caused me to yank my limb back. A hint of a smirk tugged at his face, as the affectionate moment of solidarity was ruined.

I pointed toward the control room exit. "Start walking, or I'm going to start calling you 'Predator Noah' too."

His eyebrows shot up. "You wouldn't."

“Oh, I would, right in front of your dear friend, Tossa. Test me!”

“Fine, fine. I’m going now.”

Noah’s strides were poised and confident, a far cry from the raving beast I saw minutes ago. I followed him into the cabin, and our return caused the guests to break off their discussions. Axsely had been speaking with Cupo, but she skittered away at the human’s return. She couldn’t keep doing this for the entirety of her visit. There were going to be hundreds of UN personnel on site, when we docked.

“Welcome back, Ambassador Noah,” Laulo yipped.

“Thanks. You were right about the cooling shaft.” The predator’s tone was light with false cordiality, and he settled across from the marsupial. “Quite clever deduction. We’ll be back up and running within the next few hours, I hope.”

The uplift flicked his ears in acknowledgment. Under the human’s watchful eye, I trusted that the Yotul couldn’t pull off any shenanigans. We just needed to maintain a facade of normalcy for a little longer, before we could press our suspect on his involvement.

Part of me hoped that our theory was wild speculation; that it could be disproved, for Noah’s sake. After our lengthy ordeal, both of us were beset by paranoia. I hoped this investigation wouldn’t dampen the Terran reception to their new friends. If nothing else panned out, the Zurulians looked like they might be better neighbors than us.

This could still be a positive endeavor overall, that would lend humanity a diplomatic foothold within the galaxy. We didn’t have to let one rotten fruit spoil the barrel.

Chapter 33

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

There were no signs of life or civilization nearby. The cinders of a blaze rested off to my side, an orange glow clinging to the black dust. A charred Gojid corpse was draped over the ashes, with the spaces between its skeleton hollowed out. It was as though some predator had cleaned the flesh off its carcass. How had I gotten here?

My hindlegs were tied to a pole behind me, while my forepaws were fastened to one ahead of me. Warmth brushed against my stomach, and my attention was drawn to its source below. A quick glance revealed a pit of hungry flames on sandy earth, stoked by a wooden heap.

Fuck, I'm next. Someone is trying to eat me alive, and giving warm blood a whole new meaning. What if this is the Arxur?

Every instinct encouraged me to scream, but my voice had stopped working. It felt like swimming through cement; motions lagged seconds behind my brain signals. My claws tried to move, either to cut through the ropes or thrash about. But as my vision landed upon the curved appendages, they began to peel off my paws.

Growling echoed behind me, and a bipedal shape moved within a mass of shadows. It was more rounded and graceful than any Arxur. At first, all I could see of it was the reflection of flame in its pupils. Given that its hideous gaze mirrored light directly toward me, I knew those were predator eyes. Panic constricted my throat, and the thin veneer of logic dissipated.

The creature stepped out of the shadows, baring its yellowed teeth. That sinewy form, sporting only small clumps of hair, jarred my memory. Everything I knew about humanity, including my decision to remand myself to their custody, came rushing back. That rumbling noise was laughter; they were amused by our helplessness and naivety.

Hundreds more humans emerged from the darkness, encircling me. I was right about these hairless freaks from the beginning! Now that

their ruse had taken hold, they were going to wipe out the last Gojid refugees for laughs.

The first predator twisted the crank on the spit, and my support began to descend toward the fire. Recognition flashed through my mind, picking out the green markings on his arm. It was that UN guard, Carlos! I tried to elevate my torso, but I was sinking lower by the second.

“Stop, please.” Words finally tumbled from my throat, a stream of panicked whimpers. “Carlos? Why are you doing this? Humans, y-you don’t want to do this. CARLOS!”

“Sovlin, I’m not doing anything,” the feral predator’s voice replied, though I never saw his lips move. “Wake up!”

An invisible touch jostled my shoulders, and I jolted upright in a cramped bunk. My heart was racing at a million miles an hour; panic made it impossible to think straight. I swiped my claws in a wide arc, aiming for the blurry shape in my periphery. A gravelly curse reverberated through the air, and the human sprang back with lightning-quick reflexes.

Carlos raised his hands in front of him, inching toward the door. The primate’s eyes flitted to his holster, which sat on his hip. I blinked in confusion, realizing I was back on a Terran military ship. My claws were still in one piece, and nobody had taken a bite out of me while I was sleeping.

It was a nightmare, probably the result of my brain trying to process my attitude shift toward humans. My subconscious was clinging to the notion that these predators were twisted and rapacious. The fire thing might’ve come from Terran soldiers toasting “s’mores” in the cafeteria last night. I closed my eyes, and attempted to steady my breathing.

“S-sorry. Bad dream,” I sighed.

The human narrowed his eyes. “I can tell. You said my name. Er, what was I doing?”

“You were roasting me over a fire, and laughing while I burned alive.”

“That’s absurd! Sam and I are here to babysit you, not to host a bonfire.”

I struggled to my feet, using the bedframe for support. The predators had brought me onboard as a tactical advisor, for their mission to liberate the Gojid cradle. The UN crew on the bridge gave the distinct impression that they resented my presence; several officers shot me nasty looks when I was introduced. Captain Monahan, who was the ship's commander, warned her men not to take justice into their own hands.

I know many of you have strong feelings on Sovlin, but he's a valuable asset against the enemy, she had barked. *He knows their weak points, their tactics, and the terrain we're heading into. If anyone lays a finger on him, and it gets back to me, I'll have you shitcanned so fast your head will spin.*

That made it quite evident to me that my crimes had been broadcasted across Earth. Carlos had done his best to keep me isolated from the human personnel, while Samantha told me to shrug off any taunts by soldiers in passing. I had made a few attempts to engage in personal conversation with my guards. They seemed to make a point of pulling out their phones, and ignoring my questions when I tried.

I was just curious about what a Terran's life was like, but it was obvious they wanted to shutdown any semblance of friendship. It wouldn't surprise me if chatting with a criminal would put them at odds with their associates; the last thing I wanted was to disrupt the group cohesion, prior to battle. My commentary needed to be strictly professional, and stick to the grays.

"I apologize that my dream was about you, and for my subsequent reaction," I muttered. "I'll try not to sleep for awhile."

Carlos blinked. "You don't have to not sleep, Sovlin."

"Well, I'm sorry for waking you up."

"You didn't. I was about to rouse you to go to the bridge anyways. Captain wants everyone at their stations; we're about to warp within detection range of your system."

I scampered toward the exit at those words, not wanting to miss a chance at drawing Arxur blood. Carlos' lips curved up slightly; with a snarl on his face, he looked ravenous. He escorted me out the door, whisking me down a dimly lit corridor. Dozens of unfamiliar predators were padding toward their assignments, without a lick of

fear before the looming battle. Many of their faces looked hardened and intimidating.

Thunderous chatter carried through the hallway, as we approached a bend in the path. We jogged down a small staircase to our right, which deposited us into the bridge. Captain Monahan was seated in a central chair, swiveling it toward the viewport. I recognized Samantha among a group of soldiers, comparing sensor data with projections.

There was no stone left unturned, and no post left unmanned. Humans were built for this; they adjusted to the medium of space warfare with unnatural speed. They were the only people I had ever seen mirror my excitement to draw Arxur blood. Fear pulsed through my veins, but this time, it was mixed with reverent awe.

“All plasma weapons charged, ma’am. Targeting systems on stand-by,” a voice growled at the weapons station.

Monahan nodded. “Excellent. Sensors, report?”

“230 confirmed hostiles on tracking,” came a reply, from the respective cluster. “No signs of active combat, or any remaining UN or Gojid friendlies. The grays still appear to be engaged in a bombing campaign.”

“Any Arxur vessels keeping watch? If we see them, they see us.”

“About 40 ships scattered about the inner perimeter. I’ve sent a trajectory course to navigations that’ll direct us through their weakest link.”

“Good. The entire UN fleet made the jump safely. They’ll divert a few ships to covering our six, while we blitz hellfire on those bastards.”

The bridge communication was so calm and professional, like it was down to a science. There was no questioning orders, or emotions mixed into their exchange. Judging by the simulations I saw at my initial briefing, the Terran play was to concentrate fire on the older Arxur models. Then, they were going to use their swifter ships as decoys, drawing the staunchest defenders out of position.

Carlos ushered me to a chair at the weapons station, within the captain’s earshot. Our vessel dropped out of warp, before we could be stunned by any anti-FTL weapons. Dozens of allies shimmered into position around us, cruising at various angles and headings. A

golden gas giant rested to one side, and its gravitational field might cause disruption to the enemy's readings.

A sensor analyst piped up again. "Ma'am, several Arxur patrollers are trying to pinch us on the rear flank. Closing fast."

"All according to the plan. Continue ahead."

My pupils focused on the space behind us, where several Terran ships branched off on intercept courses. The reptilians attempted to nail them with long-range missiles, but the clever monkeys deployed interceptors as a countershot. A stream of plasma spouted from the humans' railguns, bright and dazzling. Impressive as it looked, the efficacy was doubtful when an enemy wasn't in visual range.

Even predators can't line anything up from that distance. Are they just trying to make the Arxur flinch?

That skirmish faded into the backdrop, becoming no more than dots on my sensor overlay. Our trajectory was a straight shot to my homeworld, and that meant facing the vessels bombarding it. I believed that the humans would greet the Arxur with a ferocity they'd never seen before.

The bristling of my spines intensified, as I recalled the videos of the grays snatching Gojids off the streets. The Terran and Gojid ships that engaged the enemy were vanquished by now, succumbing to an overwhelming force. Returning with reinforcements was our final hope, but what could we save of our society? All of our landmarks and cities had been pummeled into oblivion.

My thoughts strayed to the UN soldiers on the surface, who fought tooth and nail for our civilians. The ones who missed their extraction were fucked, for lack of a better word. I wondered if a handful of humans had gotten to a bunker, and were trying to wait out the storm. Would Gojids even allow a predator to hunker down in their shelter?

"They definitely see us!" the sensors technician hissed. "52 ships and counting, breaking off from the bombing formation. All on an intercept heading toward the fleet."

A navigations officer looked to the captain. "Shall we alter our course?"

Captain Monahan scowled. "Negative. All stations, prepare to

engage."

The viewport magnified a small blip, and an angular behemoth appeared on screen. Its design catered to packing as many explosives on board as possible. I wished I could be more useful than a spectator, parked at the weapons station. The humans around me weren't seeking my advice, as I had hoped, but I worried that piping up might be taken as criticism.

The officers around me were lining up a plasma beam with the hostile's nose, using AI assistance. While structural damage would be a plus, it wasn't the crippling knockout they were seeking. The precious time we spent reloading could give the Arxur time to pelt us with missiles. One human held a clawless finger over the firing trigger, and waited for the go ahead.

"You're targeting the wrong spot." The words slipped out of my mouth, and a few irritated gazes landed on me. I didn't know how anyone could get used to their paralyzing stares. "Y-you could do… more damage elsewhere."

"Sit down and shut up," a primate to my right sneered, wrinkling his nose. I believe I overheard a cohort call him Oliver. "You're fucking lucky we don't use you as bait."

Captain Monahan raised a hand. "That's enough. Speak up, Sovlin; you're here to offer insight."

"You're trying to knock out propulsion or ventilation…like your briefings said. Which, your intelligence is right; that's the play for most ships. But this is a heavy bomber."

"And?" she pressed.

"It's bursting to the seams with explosives. You hit it anywhere in its belly, and it'll go up in flames. Much cleaner."

"How do we know he's not trying to trip us up? Get us killed?" the disdainful Oliver shouted.

My nostrils flared with indignation. "I would never help the Arxur! It can't be that hard to believe that I want those fuckwits to fry."

The captain drummed her fingers on an armrest, reminding me of my behavior with claws. Monahan was debating whether to trust me with the lives of her crew, even if my counsel was a good idea on paper. With the grays coming in hot, there were only seconds to

reach a decision. I was a variable to her; someone who, until days ago, would cheer if this entire ship was terminated.

Now, I see humans as people…or at least, I'm trying to. But I wouldn't believe that from me, in their position.

"Lower our heading, and fire a shot as quick as possible. Target the center of its underside," she growled. "Sovlin, if you're wrong about this, I'm going to throw you in a deep, dark hole for a long fucking time."

A falling sensation permeated the artificial gravity, as the warship rapidly altered its course. The weapons station heeded the orders, despite any crewmates' extraneous opinions. They selected the approximate coordinates, and dispatched a plasma beam in quick succession.

The Arxur ship's approach carried it within weapons range, and it launched a slew of missiles toward us. The humans' power was committed to weapons, not shields. We didn't have enough time to raise them, and stabilize our defenses. The Terrans veered sharply to one side, and I prayed the projectiles would avoid clipping us.

The energy from our railgun closed the distance with formidable speed, sizzling across the sky. Our plasma volley arrived before the Arxur munitions, punching into the missile bay. Explosions rocked its insides, and set off a chain reaction that culminated with the drive.

Premature cheers came from the humans, as our opponent was reduced to a sea of shrapnel. While I was satisfied with my own knowledge, the grays' destruction didn't stop the inbound explosives. Our hull creaked from the strain of our evasive maneuver. The missile indicators practically overlapped with our ship; my heart pounded in my ribcage.

One by one, the flashing dots slipped past us, avoiding contact with the extensive vessel. It was only then that I allowed myself to celebrate our first triumph. Standing on a bridge with these predators felt good, for some strange reason.

"Nice call, Sovlin." Captain Monahan bared her teeth, which made me shudder. "We'll make a note of that ship class. Thanks for the heads up."

"D-don't mention it. Like I said, I want those monstrosities dead."

“All of them dead is the plan.”

Those words were music to my ears. Was it too much to hope for my planet, and my galaxy, to be cleansed of merciless filth? The Arxur deserved to have their own tactics lobbed against them. There wasn’t enough suffering in the world for our nemesis, but I would settle for a long list of casualties.

The human vessel plowed ahead, continuing to make headway toward the Gojid cradle. Scoring a victory today would be the kind of morale booster Earth needed. And for the first time in awhile, I thought the Federation might have a chance in the war. We had our own predators now.

Chapter 34

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

The way the humans maneuvered through space was like a bird of prey, swooping down on its intended target. It was a graceful and emotionless flight, as I watched the blues and tans of my planet come into focus. Those in the UN fleet who shrugged off their assailants fell into position, and began to coordinate their next targets.

Meanwhile, the dogged Arxur were forming ranks across the globe; they had no intent of relinquishing their position to a few primitives. Every sort of ammunition imaginable was ready to be lobbed at the first UN ship to stray too close. The Terrans weren't foolish enough to approach the reptilians directly, instead charting their course off to one side. Our nimble ships then hooked sharply back toward the fray, with surprising maneuverability.

I'm surprised the Terrans spec'd into speed. It's clear they tweaked whatever Venlil building blocks they got their hands on.

The furless predators at our weapon station were growling over which enemy to take on. An indicator blinked red on my data feed, as the humans singled out the weakest link. I squinted at the viewport, studying their selection. The enemy ship's exterior had lost its shine, and its armor didn't look as thorough as its companions.

"Deploy missiles on target, and follow it up with everything our railgun's got." Captain Monahan's voice pierced the air, booming and authoritative. "Divert all power to shields, as soon as we get a shot off."

Carlos tapped me on the shoulder. "Hold on. We could be in for a rough ride. Let's hope our new developments in ablative armor pay off."

We banked toward our intended target, which seemed to be tracking us as well. A spray of kinetics battered our exterior, though they did little more than superficial damage. Terran ship design diverged slightly from the Federation, which meant the grays hadn't

learned our weakness. The primates held much more intelligence about the Arxur than the other way around.

Around us, UN ships were careening into the fray with guns blazing; pockets of fire littered the space in our periphery. I couldn't tell who was suffering more losses in this initial confrontation. The clash of two species of equal ferocity could only mean carnage. The bombing of the cradle ground to a halt, at least, as every ship was drawn away to address the vicious humans.

The fact that a large-scale conflict with apex predators is even close is a damn miracle. It's easy to forget the Earthlings developed FTL a few months ago, I mused. *Imagine how indomitable they could be, given a few hundred years of practice. A scary thought.*

Amidst my musings, our spacecraft pelted its opponent with a flurry of missiles. Prompt point defenses took out most of our firepower, but a handful detonated against the Arxur's armor. The rival ship struggled to regain its bearings, and was unable to return fire with its own munitions.

While dazed, and possibly with navigational troubles, its defenses had shrugged off our initial assault. The dilapidated Arxur vessel peeled back toward one of its compatriots, seeking backup. I could feel the roar of our engine, as we gave chase at full speed.

The technicians at the weapons station were racing to get the shot off. Obliterating the grays with plasma would be a stylish finish. The enemy sensed that they were about to be nailed by the railgun, and yanked their nose skyward.

The humans failed to compensate for the change of course, and our plasma stream missed the mark by a wide margin. The reptilians were emboldened after skirting our heavy blow; they knew we would have to reload. Worse, they succeeded in drawing a partner's attention, and this late joiner was a newer Arxur model.

"Raise shields!" the Terran captain barked. "Switch over to kinetics. Full speed toward the *UNS Lovecraft*."

Our flight took on an erratic path, as the engines were pushed to their limit. The state-of-the-art, fresh Arxur partner had no trouble keeping pace with us, even at our maximum speed. This was back to what they were used to; chasing an enemy that knew they were beaten. The human predators were on their heels, like everyone

else.

The Terrans sent off bursts of kinetic bullets, despite knowing full well that the grays' shields would absorb their punch. Right now, we needed to buy time to find our own backup; it couldn't hurt to throw everything in our arsenal at them. My sensors told me that both Arxur ships had us target-locked, and that couldn't be a good omen.

On screen, the allied *UNS Lovecraft* moseyed toward us; the flashy blue crest on its hull demonstrated it wasn't designed for camouflage. The rectangular shape, which seemed to boast retractable doors, suggested it could be transporting smaller craft. This human ship was an unseemly clump of mass and guns. A layer of paint didn't hide that it was a predatory prowler.

Some of their ships are definitely modified Venlil models, but this one? This screams humanity, I thought.

A sensors technician glanced at the captain. "The computer suggests the second Arxur hostile's railguns are charged. Evasive maneuvers are infeasible."

"Understood," Monahan replied, her voice icy calm. "Brace for impact."

My claws sank into the armrest, and nerves bubbled in my chest. Why were the humans not showing more alarm? An imminent threat on their lives should at least rattle anyone with a trace of sanity. I knew that these predators could feel fear from…Marcel's responses to me.

Plasma snaked toward us, hungry to devour our metallic shell. The white-hot blur plowed into an aft hangar; at least, that's where sensors registered the impact. My arm was nearly jerked out of its socket, as the force reached the bridge. The overhead lights snapped off from an electrical short-circuit, and baseboard lighting provided an eerie glow.

The predators that were standing found themselves on the ground. A few of the unfortunate crewmates faceplanted, and hobbled off to mend their injuries. Alarms warned that structural integrity was compromised. Atmosphere was venting from the rear sector, which would require repairs if we survived this battle.

"*UNS Rocinante,* you alright?" a throaty voice crackled from the

speakers.

Captain Monahan surveyed the bridge. “Still in one piece, *Lovecraft*. We could use a hand.”

“You heard the lady,” came the reply. “Let her rip, boys.”

Our ship staggered down to avoid getting in their line of sight. The *Lovecraft* powered up twin railguns on its broad hull, undeterred by the energy demands. I doubted they could command the same power as a sole armament. The humans must believe wounding an enemy in two places offset that drawback.

The new-fangled Arxur wizened up to the peril a bit late. By the time it slowed its pace, Terran plasma was already in transit. Two simultaneous beams blazed scars on both flanks, connecting with several key systems. The drive-plume flickered out altogether, which meant our foe was out of commission.

UN pilots steered the *Lovecraft* toward the original Arxur, and deployed missiles on target. With that monstrous warship on our side, confidence was restored within the bridge. Several humans’ eyes glowed with anticipation of the kill; these predators smelled blood. While the aged vessel was preoccupied with the inbound parcel, the weapons station coaxed our ship’s railgun back online.

A plasma beam barreled toward its target with perfect aim, magnetically accelerated by my devious partners. My instincts told me the enemy was toast before it arrived. Some intuition sensed that the momentum had shifted in our favor, and the Terrans didn’t need a second chance to capitalize.

Fire seared atop the enemy’s armor, and its integrity collapsed. The scorched metal split open from side-to-side, leaving the ship powerless and immobilized. With its weapons systems knocked offline, the Arxur couldn’t deploy interceptors against the *Lovecraft*’s missile barrage. The vessel exploded in an orange burst, churned into metallic residue and fragments.

“That’ll leave a mark,” came the gloating comment from our allies. “We’re off to respond to another distress signal. Smooth sailing.”

Captain Monahan offered her thanks over the comms, before reviewing the damage to our vessel. It wasn’t quite as extensive as I would expect. There were some nasty wounds across the ship’s body, but all major systems were functional. As long as there were

no issues funneling power to weapons and propulsion, we were still in the fight.

The human officer straightened. “Navs, bring us closer to the planet. Our structural integrity is weakened, so we’re going to play a supporting role.”

I lowered my head for a moment, trying to cleanse some of the fear chemicals from my system. The exhilaration, of killing the Arxur, was lost beneath raw sensation. The burning in my chest was making it difficult to breathe, as if I was walking the line with cardiac arrest.

While the predators breathing down my neck were dangerous and untamed, I was thankful they were at the helm. A human’s split-second decision making, under duress, was clearly better than mine. Our brush with death struck more fear into my heart, than any of the surrounding crewmates.

And you’re considered exceptionally brave at home, I mused. *I suppose keeping it together enough to function, is what we consider stoicism.*

Our vessel curved a winding path through the battlefield, avoiding a solo confrontation with any lurking Arxur. It was sobering to see that several dozen UN indicators had flickered out on our sensors. I hoped those measurements were erroneous, or that each fallen had at least taken two enemies with them.

The good news was that we had numbers. That advantage was minimized in clashes involving the Federation, when fleets often fell into disarray at the first sign of incoming fire. A bold charge, like the Terrans were attempting, was nigh unthinkable. We lost the psychological war before we ever thought of the physical one.

“Sensors, pick out an enemy that’s showing signs of critical damage.” Captain Monahan nodded at the viewport, a thoughtful look on her face. “We don’t want anyone to limp off and nurse their wounds.”

“On it,” a technician answered.

My eyes turned toward the cradle, and homesickness burgeoned in my chest. Beneath the tranquil blue exterior, I knew the ground was ashen and lifeless. The Arxur ships, gliding above the atmosphere, menaced the skies. They were locked in combat with the humans now, but if our mission failed, they would return to their bombing

in a heartbeat.

A dark, rectangular object, which burned away from the planet's glow, caught my attention. There was only one Arxur ship that would flee from the heart of battle. My heart sank into my stomach, and I realized which target the Terrans had to choose. It was a small mercy, for the souls onboard.

I leapt to my paws, ignoring the bile rising in my throat. "Terminate the hostile labeled A9241, on your sensors. Please. It's on an ascent course, departing from the cradle."

"Hold on. Why that particular ship?" Monahan asked.

I met her steely gaze. "It's a cattle ship. It cannot be allowed to leave the system. Put those Gojids out of their misery, I beg you."

"There are innocent hostages on that ship? We don't kill civilians, whenever it's possible to avoid it."

"But there are fates *much* worse than death. Humans, please tell me you're logical enough to understand. There are children on there, and I know you care for them. You're saving hundreds of people from an existence you cannot imagine."

The captain studied her own readout, and waved the first officer over for a brief conference. I didn't know what she was discussing with him; it was an easy decision to me. Their hushed words gave the grays time to get away. Maybe these predators did have stunted morality, if they couldn't discern the lesser evil here. Forget the letter of the law!

Monahan's head snapped up. "Sovlin, how many Arxur do you expect are onboard?"

"I don't know! It's not like anyone's ever been on one of their ships," I growled. "But, uh, their landing parties are usually around 2-3 dozen per group."

"That seems manageable. I'll put together a breach team, and we'll send a shuttle to board them. All we need is to knock out propulsion, so they're dead in the waters."

The proposition was so simple, yet it almost moved me to tears. I couldn't believe these savage beasts would attempt a rescue mission mid-battle, at grave peril to their own personnel. From how the UN captain reacted, it was her first instinct. The thought hadn't crossed

my mind to think of those Gojids as anything but gone.

As the officers began assembling a flight crew, I realized there was a foundation of genuine trust forming. The idea that humanity would want the sapient livestock for themselves had barely crossed my mind. I'd begun to believe that this "conquering species" would help us, just as they had with our refugees.

Captain Monahan barked orders to the bridge personnel, who began scrounging what energy they could for the plasma railgun. There was no time to await backup, and most UN ships were preoccupied regardless. The comms station notified all nearby friendlies of the cattle vessel, so that it wouldn't be shot down while we were trying to seize it. If reinforcements arrived down the line, that would be a bonus.

"Sovlin, I'm going to offer my name for the boarding party." Hatred radiated from Carlos, as his gaze scorched toward the viewport. "I am a foot soldier, after all. I'd like a crack at those gray freaks."

The humans' pent-up rage seeped out, as they contemplated the terrorizing foe. Hunger trickled into their stances and snarls. I could almost feel its burning hum through their veins. Wild, untapped anger spurred the primates to action, and demanded retribution for the cruelty they perceived.

They're channeling their predatory energy. But they're still in control of themselves, somehow, even in hunting mode. I can't imagine the intrusive thoughts it puts in their heads.

Our ship raced toward the Arxur's transport, gaining on the clunky object. Cattle vessels did have external weapons, but they were more limited than their warship counterparts. However, their internal armory wouldn't be deficient, by any metric; they were equipped with the tools to eviscerate a city. This wasn't going to be an easy task for my human allies.

"You're all so noble, and fearsome," I growled. "Captain Monahan, let me accompany your team, please."

The captain raised her eyebrows. "Why would I do that? So the only Federation asset we have can be KIA?"

"KIA?"

"Killed in action."

“Oh, uh, I won’t get in your way. If you manage to free those Gojids, you’ll need me to stop a stampede. They’re not going to be in their right minds. You’ll…see why.”

Monahan’s rosy lips twitched, and I could sense the unspoken question on her tongue. After witnessing our lack of composure, during their initial landing, she wasn’t sure I’d be in my right mind. It was a valid question, honestly. Charging through an enclosed space, surrounded by Arxur and gunfighting, would break most Gojids.

The mere sight of binocular eyes pumped dread through my veins, and made my spines bristle. It was a constant effort to push that aside, but I could power through it in most cases. My fury toward the grays *had* to be enough to override it. I tried to show my determination through teeth-baring, raising my claws in a threatening manner.

She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Very well. Don’t fuck this up, and…for the love of God, don’t die.”

“Understood, ma’am,” I answered. “Just, er, if the mission fails, please take out that ship. No matter who’s onboard.”

“They won’t make it out of this system. Not on my watch.”

A wave of livid excitement almost swept me off my feet, as I eyed the cattle vessel in the viewport. Few people met an Arxur face-to-face, and lived to tell the tale. Insertion into an enemy ship could end in complete catastrophe; such a feat would be unheard of. My predatory companions either didn’t realize, or didn’t care how risky their stunt was.

The eager weapons station pinpointed their target, and plasma arced across the void. My nostrils twitched with anticipation; I was raring to go, same as the predators. This role was a pitiful attempt to atone for my crimes, but at least I felt certain I was on the right side. Any way I could assist the humans, I was going to chip in.

Chapter 35

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

The bulletproof vest afforded to me by the predators was snug around my spines, but nearly fell off my shoulders. Its shape was not designed for the rotund Gojid species. The slender curvature of the human spine was a polar opposite, evolved for grace and flexibility.

I knew the armor might save my life, but I wish I waited longer to don it. My bristles were being compressed at irritating angles, and the nearest soldiers seemed annoyed by my inability to sit still. The humans were sandwiched together in the shuttle, brushing shoulders with each other. I was glad to be at the end, so I could lean toward the wall.

Samantha traded places with Carlos halfway through the ride. She bore an obvious disdain for me, but the male guard had enough of my fidgeting. Many of the general soldiers curled their lips in contempt as well; I wasn't winning any popularity contests with these predators. I was grateful we were only a minute out from the cattle vessel.

"Did we succeed at paralyzing the Arxur transport?" I asked the female chaperone.

Her eyelashes fluttered in annoyance. "Yes. Were you not listening to the damn announcements?"

"Relax, Sam. It was an innocent question," Carlos sighed. "I'm sure he just zoned out."

"You feel sorry for the racist war criminal?" a soldier called out.

I saw a few humans nod their heads in agreement, which caused me to lower my gaze. There wouldn't be many tears shed by anyone other than the UN brass, if the Arxur gunned me down today. Not that I blamed them; an honorable death wasn't the worst thing I could think of. Dying scared me more than death.

I wish I had a weapon, so I could actually help. I don't want to stay back, and let them do all the fighting.

“Well, that’s great news,” I said, ignoring the jab. “Can I have a gun?”

“No,” a chorus of voices answered in unison.

I waved my claws dismissively. “Worth a shot.”

The shuttle lurched beneath my paws, and my vest pressed harder against my spines. There was going to be some light bruising tomorrow, if I lived past this battle. Our craft latched onto an Arxur wing, attaching itself to the immobilized transport. We inched forward so that our airlock stood across from theirs.

A vac-suited predator slipped into our emergency airlock, and I strained to see his movements through the window. The Terran unfurled a walkway on our side, then floated across to the Arxur vessel with a gentle push. All that tied him to us was a thin rope on his waist. He tested a red lever with a feeble hand, and confirmed that it wasn’t locked.

The human nodded to himself, and used some sort of suction technology to adhere the tunnel to the enemy ship. His feet clicked onto the ground, as the artificial gravity initiated. Once the corridor was sealed from the vacuum, he raised his thumb to the rest of us. I didn’t understand the signal, but the others took it as a go-ahead.

The UN soldiers trundled out of the ship, wielding massive rifles. While the predators possessed few natural gifts, they were saddled with a truckload of gear. Their warriors were clad head-to-toe in black armor, including a hard shell atop their heads. Once they shoved reflective goggles over their eyes, humans looked like homogenous, impassive machines.

“Stick behind us, Sovlin.” Samantha rose to her feet, falling into the rear of the pack. “We can’t leave you here to get captured. Take cover, and stay out of the way ’til you’re needed.”

Silence fell over our entourage, as the primates crossed the cattle ship’s threshold. I couldn’t help but notice the humans’ slinking posture, as though they were stalking prey in a shaded forest. They were crouched to a fraction of their normal height, with steps that were furtive and calculated. Their guns swiveled in every direction, searching for a target to pounce on.

With a hint of reluctance, my paws followed them down the tunnel. There were some short bursts of gunfire, as they pumped a few

unprepared Arxur full of lead. I suppressed a chuckle, knowing it would make me seem deranged. The enemy would raise the alarm now, but I relished that we got the drop on them.

My attention switched to the reptilian interior, taking mental notes of its facilities. The Federation would kill for intelligence like this. The atmosphere was musty, but the lighting was rich and plentiful. The hygiene of the enemy ship surprised me as well; it didn't reek of rotten flesh or blood. I guess those savages understood basic disease transmission after all.

We followed the entryway a few hundred paces, before we reached a bend in the path. The team leader poked his head around the corner, and immediately recoiled. A barrage of bullets decimated the wall, where his shell-cap poked out moments earlier. He ducked back behind cover, hugging his weapon to his chest.

"8 or 9 hostiles arming themselves, and taking positions," he hissed. "They're waiting for us."

We have more numbers than that, but the Arxur have a clear line of sight. They're going to nail us as soon as we advance.

A human rolled a metal canister across the floor, which released a milky plume of smoke. Irritants dispersed through the hallway, and I squinted to see anything. There was no way the Arxur could determine our position, if I could barely see my claws in front of me. Shrouded in the haze of silver mist, the Terrans stepped out from behind their refuge.

The Arxur sprayed bullets in our direction, hoping to connect with something. These sounds helped the humans key in on their positions, and they spewed their own rounds back in return. Terrans seemed to fare better in low visibility, with their remarkable adaptiveness. The silhouetted movement I glimpsed in the mist suggested a few grays were hit.

As the smoke dissipated, the primates sprang toward any makeshift shelter they could find. Carlos pulled me behind a supply cart, and popped his gun over the top. Samantha sprawled on the floor beside him. Her hands were steady as she gazed down the scope, and fired at an Arxur attempting to fall back. I didn't know the grays *could* retreat.

"I imagine, down that main staircase, we'll find living quarters, the

cattle pens, and the bridge," Samantha growled. "They don't want us to get to anything vital."

The female human stood to get a better look, and inched forward to join another UN cluster. My eyes drifted to the Arxur she shot, who was bleeding profusely. The enemy bastard was still twitching, until another Terran soldier unloaded a clip into its head. That was overkill, but hey, I wasn't judging.

Samantha caressed her rifle with a gloved hand, and waved for Carlos and I to follow. Hesitant as I was to move, the handful of hostile survivors were regrouping with their brethren. The Terrans blinding every combatant caught the Arxur off-guard. It forced them to make concessions, and await backup.

The grays haven't fought a true enemy in a long time, have they? I mused. *They haven't been on the back foot for a second in this war. Our weakness has made them complacent.*

There was no sound from the presumed Arxur position, and I guessed they were lying in wait. The UN contingent advanced with caution, creeping toward the stairway. Their boots glided across the metal, as light as the patter of rain. Whether they were coached by instinct, training, or generational experience, I did not know.

A grating voice rumbled over the PA. "Greetings, fellow hunters. I take it you don't appreciate that we, ah, stole your catch."

Several human predators startled, and their attention shifted overhead. My jaw almost dropped to the floor; the Arxur never conversed so eloquently with us. We translated their dialects at first contact, but I couldn't remember them enunciating anything but vulgar threats in my lifetime. It was incredible that they had words for "greetings" or "appreciate."

"We would've offered to split the haul, if we realized our intrusion sooner," the Arxur continued. "You made things much easier for us, and we're not entirely ungrateful. You already learned that Gojids make excellent slaves, judging by your companion."

I bared my teeth, incensed that this monstrosity thought I was a human plaything. While I was a Terran prisoner, that was a far cry from servitude and degradation. There was nothing I had been forced to do; my presence on this mission was voluntary, and my treatment was fairer than I deserved.

Carlos nudged me, pointing to a blinking red light on the ceiling. There was a camera tracking our movements, and granting the enemy a full view of our advance. He raised only his middle finger, and several of his counterparts copied the gesture. I didn't understand what that meant either, but I guessed it was something hateful.

"Go fuck yourselves!" the male guard shouted.

Probably that. Note to self.

"Ah, to be a young race again. Let's get that aggression out of our systems. Then, after, we should pool our resources to bring the lesser species to heel." The reptile sounded almost disappointed, as though it would enjoy a test of strength. "Anything else would be… wasteful, when our interests are aligned. As loathsome as 'sharing' is, there's enough food to go around."

Did those demons just offer to ally with humanity against the Federation?! My blood boiled at the thought. It had to be a trap, since everyone knew the Arxur were incapable of inter-species cooperation. They couldn't get along with themselves. The grays were locked in a global bloodbath, which jeopardized their world's survival, when we found them.

The prospect of the Terrans switching sides was unnerving, all the same. The clawless "omnivores" hadn't been welcomed into the galaxy with open arms. The lack of clarity from our factions meant threats could still reside within the Federation. Would humans view siding with monsters as the only way to save their Earth?

Carlos gunned down the camera lens with prejudice, and answered the question for me. His knuckles were strained against the cloth coverings, from being clenched around his rifle. The soldier at the advance's forefront raised a fist, and our posse shuffled to a halt astride of the staircase. Odds were, the enemy was gathering in the deck underneath us.

"Fire in the hole!" a human voice declared.

A UN soldier lobbed a grenade into the open area, and we watched it clatter down the incline. The resulting explosion detonated atop any Arxur in the vicinity. I heard a gurgling scream, as if shrapnel hit one of the reptiles in the throat. My predatory allies moved down the first steps, and followed it up with another explosive toss.

That should be enough to get the enemy to move back.

The primates bounded down the last of the staircase, and jammed down their firing triggers. I followed Samantha's movements, and tried to keep my head low. We took refuge behind a trash can, in what appeared to be a mess hall. There were blood-speckled trays and reading materials left abandoned on the tables.

What do you know? Eating sentients is a communal activity, I guess.

Arxur gunfire peppered the walls around us, and took down several humans. Other Terrans stepped in as soon as they saw a counterpart felled, dragging them to safety. Attempts to stymie the bleeding looked hopeless, in many cases, but their efforts were charged with emotion. It was mind-boggling how a predator's warrior class could forge such deep bonds.

How they could even think of their fellow man, during the insanity of battle, was beyond me. The amount of Arxur tickled every flighty urge in my DNA, and overstimulation made my head swim. This wasn't at all like my revenge fantasies. I was helpless, without any weapon, if one of them lunged at me.

I could sense several reptilian eyes on me. From their vantage point, dinner just walked in front of a firing squad. Malicious snarls sent in my direction told me what they saw in my form. The humans, for all their unwanted teeth baring, had never seemed so "distracted" by me.

"S-stay calm, Sovlin. You hate predators. You want them to burn, rot, and die in agony," I murmured.

Samantha snorted. "Gee, thanks."

"Not you. You're different."

"Whatever you—"

A stray bullet grazed the female's headgear. She sensed it clip her cap, and fell back as a kneejerk reaction. The soldier dragged herself back up against the waste bin, with erratic breathing. After taking a moment to collect her wits, she worked to get her rifle situated.

Guilt flashed through my mind, realizing my distraction almost killed her. Calling my guards friends would be a stretch, since that required a mutual respect. But they had become familiar faces, and

I didn't wish for anything to happen to them. There had to be some way for me to help, rather than impede their progress.

Carlos was crouched a few paces deeper, using an upturned table as a shelter. Several UN soldiers were positioned there, coordinating fire. My eyes widened in alarm as I saw an Arxur duo attempting to encircle them. I shouted to warn the humans, but the deafening pops of gunfire drowned out my words.

Panic fluttered in my chest, as a reptile straightened its rifle. Sitting here and doing nothing wasn't an option; Samantha was too rattled from her encounter to react in time. The mangled Arxur corpse, downed by a grenade at the base of the staircase, caught my eye. A crazy thought leapt into my head, as I glimpsed the bloodied gun in its grip.

"SOVLIN! What the fuck are you—" the female human began.

I dashed out behind cover, and retraced my short steps into the room. The tile was slick with blood, which made traction a struggle. Prying the firearm from the beast's lifeless grasp, I tried to line up the shot. My heart was hammering at a million parsecs an hour, and my paws quivered too much to steady it.

The lead Arxur fired off the first shot, nailing one of Carlos' companions in the back of the neck. The other humans whirled around, but they couldn't react in the half-second it would take to execute them all. Gritting my teeth, I tried to lock my wrists. I released several rounds, praying I wouldn't accidentally hit the Terrans.

Two of my five bullets nailed the first Arxur, and it crumpled to the floor. Its partner stumbled over the body, which gave the primates enough time to swivel around. An unfamiliar Terran blew its head off with panicked motions. Carlos turned his masked skull, looking for the source of the shots that saved him. His gaze faced me, as I skittered back to Samantha.

The female snatched the firearm from my grip, tucking it under her arm.

"You're really going to take the gun away?" I groaned. "I saved…"

She offered a grudging sigh. "You saved Carlos' life."

"I'm good at killing…for a Gojid. Let me help, please."

“Not a chance. Don’t even think about pulling a stunt like that again.”

I chewed at my claws, and leaned back against the wall. Several human corpses were strewn about the entry point, suggesting many hadn’t been as lucky as Carlos. These Terran soldiers were resilient, but it was evident Arxur marksmen had wicked accuracy.

About half of our active allies appeared to be nursing injuries, which spoke to an unrivaled ability to persist through pain. Then again, I couldn’t tell when crimson bloodstains were theirs, or a comrade’s. Regardless, our ranks weren’t unscathed.

From what I could make out of the scenery, the grays had suffered their fair share of casualties too. Their numbers were whittled down to ten or so, by my estimation. The UN warriors were starting to gain ground, and flush the enemy out. I don’t think the reptilians were prepared to fend off a larger contingent of predators.

The hostile gunfire ceased without warning, and I tilted my head in bewilderment. A firearm skidded across the floor, followed by a series of others. A handful of Arxur rose to their full height, watching the primates’ next move.

The humans paused their barrage, suspicion glowing in their eyes. What in the name of the Protector was this?

Chapter 36

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

Resounding shouts coursed through the air, as the humans rounded on the unarmed enemy. Most were some variant of a demand to lie on the ground. There was no question that this was an Arxur surrender; they were complying with the barked orders, and cuffing themselves without any clear trickery. There was no snarling or sudden movements, either.

Perhaps this inexplicable behavior was because humans earned respect, by whatever their twisted standards were. The primates' bellowing voices shook me to the core, and clearly left no room for debate. Scaring the boarders away with bloodied fangs and piercing eyes hadn't been a viable tactic, for a change.

All the same, I didn't think the reptilians were capable of submission. The Federation never managed to capture a predator, or reason with them. Appealing to mercy was an exercise in futility; amusement seemed to be the only motive they needed to destroy our worlds. Accepting the Terrans as thinking people was one thing, but the Arxur were clear-cut in their villainy.

"I wonder what Captain Monahan will do with the prisoners," I muttered.

Samantha offered a non-committal shrug. "Not my call."

"Not mine either, and that's probably a good thing." Carlos bounded up to us, raising his goggles. "We're going to have some guys make sure they sit nice and pretty for now. Probably sedate them, take them as prisoners."

"But if it was your call, what would you do?" I asked.

"I'd put them in the cattle pens. Right where they belong," he growled, a malicious gleam in his eyes. "I wonder if the grays would taste like gator. Or maybe they'd make a good pair of boots."

The bold-faced talk of eating another sentient left me taken aback. It wasn't something I thought humankind would contemplate, even for those monsters. I understood what Carlos was saying, though;

that schadenfreude was something we had in common. The guard's statement was pushing it a little far, but I was happy he was being more open with me.

Maybe Carlos is grateful I saved his life. He seems more friendly toward me.

My eyes studied the Arxur prisoners. "But they would still look hideous as boots. Also, I wouldn't want my paws touching their skin; how defiling."

"Well then, what would you do with them, Sovlin?"

As much as I would love to see the grays get a full dose of their own medicine, the stakes were too high. The intelligence a strong-willed military could extract was invaluable. If we could stop the cradle's fate from befalling another world, that was worth keeping these Arxur alive for a bit.

Besides, they deserved more suffering than a quick execution. Scientific studies of their pain tolerance and responses could offer interesting results.

My lip curled up in disgust. "I would inflict as much agony as I could. And once I had no use for it, I would blow its brain out."

"You already knew the answer to that, Carlos," Samantha hissed. "Remember why he's here? You two have fun with your…chat."

I lowered my gaze, watching the female guard stalk off. It hadn't occurred to me that I described verbatim what I had done to the first Terran soldier I found. After recognizing the parallel, Carlos would surely lose interest in speaking with me. It confused me why he didn't lope after her, but a part of me still hoped we could make progress.

"I *am* sorry. The irony is, somehow, I think you might be the only species who could understand why I did…that," I sighed.

The human crossed his arms, a conflicted glint in his eyes. "I understand why, if we were the Arxur. But you didn't even consider or research Marcel Fraser's story. Nor did you listen to the Venlil that backed him up."

"I did research. The Federation's database pegged you as a species of genocidal conquerors, who do nothing but war." My spines bristled, as I recalled the atrocities in the original briefing. "Then I

watched videos of humans gassing children and nuking your own cities! And you lecture us about stampedes. I still don't get you."

"That history makes a lot of us angry too. We're, um, capable of much of what they are. But the Ven—"

"The Venlil, Slanek, was unconscious for days. What we knew was the Republic cut off all communications, chased off aid ships at gunpoint, and took every Federation visitor hostage, after they met you. It was an obvious conclusion, at the time, that humans coerced them into those actions."

"But that's just not true. You know that."

"Now. In my paws, would you have thought humanity was friendly and empathetic? When you seemed so much like the Arxur, the *only* other known predators?"

The guard didn't say anything, but his ocular relaxation showed that my point landed. He pursed his lips, and scratched the back of his neck. It was obvious he was hesitant, to vocalize understanding for the torture of his own kind. Perhaps his concern was that nearby soldiers might overhear.

"Let's just say, by the time Slanek woke up, it was too late. I had to be right about you, or else, I was a monster." My voice cracked, and my eyes blinked shut to seal away tears. "I'm not defending… Carlos, I can't live with what I've done. Not since it hit home. I don't expect anyone's forgiveness."

The predator patted my shoulder once, with a surprising amount of gentleness. No words tumbled from his lips, but that was more consolation than I deserved. The guilt enshrouding my heart eased, for a brief moment. I realized how badly I had needed one of the humans to understand.

Carlos cleared his throat, and his gaze dialed in on the Arxur prisoners. A human had a boot planted against one's tail, with a gun barrel pressed against its skull. The reptilian's eyes were wild, with what I would think was fear, in any other species. It looked young and scrawny, which might be why it was singled out for intimidation.

"What did you do with the kids?" The UN soldier's voice was low, charged with a venomous undercurrent. "Where are they?"

"Kids?" the Arxur stammered.

“The Gojids. The ‘cattle’, you son of a bitch!”

“Why didn’t you just say that?! They’re in the cargo bay.”

“And where the fuck is that? Show us, now!”

The gray led us into the kitchen, which was placed adjacent to the cafeteria. The stations seemed more suitable to butchering than food preparation. Carlos gestured for me to follow, since my inclusion was only permitted to pacify the captives. My uneasy brain resented the march into a predator’s lair, and was relieved the human hovered close behind.

A decaying scent wafted into my nostrils, which triggered my gag reflex. A few Gojid corpses dangled from the ceiling, and had been gutted from head to toe. The amount of dried blood suggested their organs were carved out while they were alive. One carcass was noticeably smaller than the others; it looked about the size of my daughter, last time I saw her alive.

That child was dissected, then served to the group as an entrée. Just like my sweet Hania. Those vile predators…they see us as a feast.

Disgust torched a path up my esophagus, and I spewed vomit onto the tile. The way Carlos’ cheeks were ashen and puffed out, I think he was barely keeping his own lunch down. It was a relief to see the clawless predator looking squeamish. Especially after hearing him ponder how the Arxur tasted.

Heaving sounds behind me suggested that disgust was the overarching reaction, within Terran ranks. The UN soldiers bringing up our flank got more of an eyeful than they anticipated. It was baffling, that predators would have such a strong aversion to gore. All evolutionary knowledge suggested blood should serve as the enticing marker of an easy catch, and sharpen their senses.

The male guard wiped sweat off his brow. “Fuck, man. I can’t unsee that. They’re so…brutal. Senseless.”

“D-deep breaths. Don’t focus on it.”

“But the smell…”

“I know. By the way, why did your warriors split up?” I asked Carlos, trying to distract us. “Doesn’t everyone want to secure the civilians?”

Samantha cleared her throat to my right, startling me. “Enemy

officers are holed up in the bridge, and we need to sweep the ship anyways. Don't need a napping gray crawling out of a crevasse."

"I thought you didn't want to be anywhere near me."

"I don't. But it's my job."

The scrawny Arxur staggered to the kitchen's rear wall, and wagged a bony claw at the partition. The reflective metal formed two double doors, wide enough to fit a few spacecraft side-by-side. I considered that the prisoner was deceiving us, since that was their modus operandi. But it made too much sense, for the prey to be right next to the mess hall.

The Terran handler jabbed his gun barrel into the Arxur's temple. "Open the fucking door…or we'll find out what color your brains splatter."

It swallowed, and waved a paw in front of a motion sensor. I half-expected an automated turret to descend from the ceiling, and start cutting down our ranks. The humans tensed as well, clearly not trusting the beast. Despite their lack of experience with the Arxur, they seemed well-versed in the ways of sapient deception.

The doors creaked open, and the UN soldiers inched forward. There was no reinforcing army amassed inside, for all our misgivings. The cavern before us was devoid of Arxur, on the ground level, which was where my eyes stopped looking.

Of course, the reptiles wouldn't leave their prized possession unattended. Some instinct compelled the humans' binocular eyes to turn skyward. Perhaps it was the same madness that made them leap out of planes.

One Arxur camped on a raised platform, which allowed it to overlook the assembled prey. It wheeled around, slowed by the same narrow vision as the Terrans. The gray couldn't reach for its weapon before it was obliterated by dozens of bullets.

Lots of trigger-happy humans out here. They seem really on edge.

I watched as the monster slumped to the floor. Its skin was perforated everywhere that constituted a vital organ. The life flickered out of its reptilian eyes, as liters of blood dripped through the latticed walkway. It doused any Gojids below in coagulated goo, but I couldn't bring myself to face the livestock yet.

My gaze instead fell on our predatory captive; I wanted to see how it reacted to the death of a counterpart. A brief gasp slipped from its maw, and those diabolical pupils lingered on its fallen comrade for a full second. A full second longer than they should have.

“No heads up about the guard?” The UN soldier slammed his rifle butt into the Arxur prisoner’s temple. He snickered as its hindlegs buckled, and it collapsed on the floor. “Ah, shit, my hand slipped. That’s what everyone saw, isn’t it?”

The other humans nodded, as they studied the cattle enclosure in horrified silence. My reluctant eyes fell on the scene, and renewed fury surged through my spines. Gojids were packed in a pen like animals, to the brink of suffocation. I could see faces squished up against the barbed wire mesh, and paws scrabbling for a way out.

The guards must’ve fed the cattle by throwing seeds and leaves down from the walkway. Water was available through a few small basins on the rim. Many people seemed to have given up, and were lying unresponsive on the floor. The squealing of the children was what really stabbed at my heart; they sounded so high-pitched and frantic.

“HELP US! Please,” a desperate voice wailed, from the corral’s epicenter.

That individual was shushed by its counterparts, who divulged that the entrants were humans. There was no line of sight from within the throng of Gojids. All they knew was the boarders weren’t Arxur, and that the grays had succumbed to them.

The last they saw of humanity was Terran soldiers, dropping into cradle settlements. If they hadn’t witnessed the heroic sacrifices on the surface, it would be logical to assume humans orchestrated the Arxur raid. These people must think they were going from one predator’s clutches to another.

One Gojid strained his face against the mesh. “Captain Sovlin? They c-captured you?! You should know better…than to let them take you alive.”

My mouth was dry. I was too horrified by the atrocities of this vessel to find words; this felt like a waking nightmare. It was all I could do not to sink against the nearest human’s boots, and break down. The Gojid took my shocked state as affirmation of his fears,

howling with despair.

Carlos shuffled forward, kneeling by the cage's edge. He tugged at the material, which did not budge, and bared his teeth in obvious frustration. The muscles in his shoulders were quivering, with a primal rage that he was struggling to restrain. The predator couldn't bear the sobbing kids, any more than I could.

A growl emanated from his chest, and his brown eyes narrowed to slits. The compulsion to break the sapient livestock out of the cage all but possessed him. There was a franticness in his motions, as Samantha passed him a cable cutter. Carlos clipped the first strand, and other humans ambled in to help peel back the material.

The Terrans' haste was enough to snap me out of my trance. If I didn't get through to the Gojids, they would stampede right over their saviors. A mauling wasn't the way to reward the gentle beasts for their compassion.

"T-the…the humans are here as allies of the Gojidi Union. Let them help you," I croaked.

"The warlike predators who invaded our home, and caused the Arxur to capture us, are allies? Tell those demons to make their lies believable, puppet," came a sneering reply.

So this was how it felt, trying to convince a skeptical audience to see past that abominable appearance. Carlos' efforts paused for a moment, and he shared a glance with his counterparts. The gash they carved in the barbwire was almost wide enough to rip out an opening. How could anyone read malice into their actions?

Nobody ever just started off seeing humans as people. Nobody accepted their story at face value, or treated them as equals. In that moment, I felt sorry…angry for the alien predators.

I stormed toward the pen. "The ground invasion occurred because we were planning to bomb Earth; I would know. Preventing their own extinction is self-defense. The fact that they risked their lives to save you, in spite of that, shows their empathy runs deeper than ours."

"Predators don't feel empathy. The Great Protector teaches they are cursed creatures, doomed to live in eternal hunger and bloodlust."

The Great Protector? Carlos mouthed.

Arguing with a fairytale wasn't my ideal scenario, but antagonizing the religious was only going to make them shut down. There might be a shred of truth to that axiom, anyways; I had seen the Terrans tap into their aggression multiple times. Humans used their higher emotions to redirect bloodlust to proper outlets, but sometimes, their agency waned.

My eyes swept over the group. "These predators are intelligent enough to override that. To control it. The Venlil did experiments that proved they can bond with prey animals, and that they feel pain for those of us in suffering. It is irrefutable evidence, by every scientific metric."

"What? That's…that's not possible. You're saying…"

"Humans use their 'hunger' to protect the weak from threats, much like your goddess. They formed laws and morality that are civilized. Honorable, even. If they are cursed and trying to break free, wouldn't the Protector command us to help?"

The UN soldiers tugged back the spiky wall, and surveyed the traumatized Gojids. My people didn't rush on their saviors in a panic, though many shoved their way toward the escape. The alternative was to remain in Arxur custody, and the Arxur were a known commodity. Even if the Terrans were just as evil, it was difficult for them to be worse.

Several humans extended gloved hands, hoisting the victims onto solid ground. Herbivore food and clean water awaited the rescued; the special care they gave to the young didn't escape my notice. Samantha's eyes glowed as she began to spoon-feed an emaciated infant. I had never seen such a toothy snarl on her face, or heard her speak so softly.

This skirmish hadn't been to contest the cattle claim, at all. I wondered what the Arxur would think, when they realized the predators they viewed as equals, despised them as much as the rest of the galaxy. Whether humanity's interrogations turned up anything useful or not, it would be priceless to be a fly on the wall.

Chapter 37

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

In the month we had been away, the predators seemed to have established their presence on Venlil Prime. Teeming masses of humans with cameras awaited the shuttle; the increase in personnel was noticeable. Venlil journalists were squeezed right next to the formidable beasts, and didn't pay their counterparts much attention. They must have done extensive work with Terrans, to be so casual.

Several individuals in the UN's baby blue welcomed the new species, and offered polite introductions. Their eyes were concealed in floral-colored visors, which was a clear attempt to look as non-threatening as possible. They paused as they saw the Sivkit diplomat bolt away from the crowd; Axsely's snowy pelt vanished into the thick bushes around the governor mansion.

Ambassador Noah took a step in that direction, as though he wanted to follow her. I placed a paw on his arm, and shook my head.

"Chasing after her will only make it worse. At any rate, we need to speak with your people, immediately," I muttered.

Concern flickered in his brown eyes. "Is something wrong? You've been…subdued. You learned something, when they answered."

As soon as we entered FTL-communication range, I had relayed word of the Federation delegation through government channels. Chauson patched up the ship enough to travel, but affirmed that the cooling shaft showed signs of external tampering. I didn't convey those details over the network, since I didn't want the UN embassy's greeting to involve guns and interrogation.

The Venlil government brought Terran officials into the loop, and related some startling developments in the Gojid war. However, the immediate concern was that both parties seemed surprised by our contact. That meant Recel's ship never reached its destination. With our lengthy delay, they should have arrived well before we crossed Venlil space.

At my request, the Terrans deployed a search-and-rescue team to follow their flight path. I kept the knowledge to myself, to avoid a panic, but the worry was nagging at me. What would happen to our relations with those six species, if something had gone wrong?

My ears pressed back against my head. “I learned several things, which are all troubling. Let me brush off the media, and then, we will join Kam in the briefing room.”

The camera-wielding primates drew closer with a clamor, and Venlil yipped questions as well. My instincts protested allowing noisy predators to crowd me in every direction; the humans were more aggressive than I was used to, with our own reporters. I breathed a silent sigh of relief, as they granted enough space for us to pass.

I think some of the human journalists’ bad habits…their ambush tactics, have rubbed off on these Venlil. Stars.

“I politely request that you lower the volume of your speech, especially when you are this close. My ears are more sensitive than yours, and it carries more intimidation than I believe you intend,” I barked to the microphones.

The crescendo of Terran questions died down, which lessened the encounter’s intensity. At least if they were all badgering us, someone had the good sense to tell them to avoid the new diplomats. We might have other visitors running into the foliage, if this ensnarement was attempted on anyone else.

“What happened at the Federation summit?” an insistent voice called out.

“I am behind on everything that’s happened in the past month, so I’m not taking general questions right now,” I said, forcing a level cadence. “For now, you can report to Earth that 11 species offered to open diplomatic relations with you.”

“Only 11?”

“Noah Williams, how was your treatment at their hands?”

“Is the rest of the Federation at war with humanity?”

“How do you think this will affect human-Venlil relations?”

“LET ME FINISH!” I spat. “Over 100 species voted to ally with you against the Arxur. An even larger sector are either undecided, or

opted for an isolationist policy. While these may not be the results you hoped for, I see them as a positive step forward, from wishing your species extinct. However—"

"The Krakotl fleet are amassing warships, with support from several neighbors, in every border station that faces our space. How can we trust that these public stances aren't intended as deception?"

"You might find your questions resolved, if my answers could reach their conclusion," I growled with frustration. "I was about to explain that 38 member states would not budge on their extermination position, and may seek a war of extinction. The Krakotl were one of these…a rather vocal one."

Agitated whispers cycled through the crowd. I knew there was the half-second it'd take the humans to process that information, before they'd launch into a new inquisition. The questions would fall into predictable categories; how Earth should defend itself from these threats, if diplomatic resolutions were off the table, and what assistance the Venlil would provide.

"I am going to discuss with your generals and my generals how to handle this now. Perhaps our new allies will help us." I swished my tail toward the Zurulian diplomat, who had settled down atop a human's shoe. The predator looked taken aback, but didn't move his foot. "No matter what, we will figure this out together. The Venlil will stand with humanity to the end. Now, excuse me."

Noah grinned as he saw my irritated head shakes. The Terran ambassador clasped his hands behind his back, and followed me into the governor's mansion. There was something in his eyes, beyond amusement, as his gaze bored into my skull. It almost came off as predatory hunger, though for some reason, it wasn't unnerving.

The human held open the door, his stare never faltering as we walked into the briefing center. That unblinking fixation was distracting; I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell him to break eye contact. It took a colossal effort to recall the planet-threatening reasons we were here.

General Kam leapt from his chair. "Governor, Ambassador! We're all delighted you're back."

I took a seat next to him, and the predator settled beside me. "I

would say it's good to be back, but…in the month I've been gone, the Gojid cradle was glassed?!"

"What?" Noah hissed. "Please, don't tell me we did that."

From his dejected tone, it seemed he considered that well within the realm of possibility. My certainty, that there was another explanation, wavered after his response. The UN's position against civilian casualties seemed set in stone, at that initial briefing. Perhaps Meier was just saying what we wanted to hear, so he could obtain our aid.

"The Arxur took advantage of the defenses being down. There was nothing we could do," General Jones, of the American clan, growled. "We lost a considerable amount of our own troops, trying to evacuate civilians."

I lowered my gaze. "And the civilians you did evacuate are where?"

"Earth. Mostly refugee camps in New York."

My eyes about bulged out of my skull. The humans thought it was a good idea, to take a bunch of terrified refugees to a predator's homeworld, far away from their own territory? Those Gojids must be overwhelmed, and the optics of this were atrocious. It would've been a better solution to host them on Venlil Prime, or transport them to a Gojid colony.

General Zhao narrowed his eyes. "Governor, you look displeased. Do you not trust humans to be proper caregivers?"

"You misunderstand. Candidly, this is an absolute disaster," I grumbled. "52 species specified they were waiting for news from the cradle, to determine their diplomatic position. When they hear it's been destroyed…"

"They'll blame humanity. She's right. I wouldn't be surprised if they accused us of coordinating with the Arxur," Noah finished.

A sigh slipped from my lips. "The refugees are the 'cherry on top', as you say. When they hear you're keeping them in camps on Earth, they'll assume you're keeping them as cattle."

"We have troves of footage, showcasing our humanitarian efforts," the Chinese general objected.

"And? It's easy enough to dismiss that as staged propaganda. I bet anything, the Krakotl will use this to gain public support for their

attack. To smear you as slaving predators."

Hell, what was stopping the species on-world from rescinding their diplomatic offer? The Mazic president was going to flip when he learned of the cradle's destruction. This was a grave setback to our progress with the friendly governments, and it would push most undecided factions toward animosity.

At least I'd had a few hours, to deliberate how to react to various scenarios; this was all news to Noah. The Terran ambassador shifted beside me, and I could sense his surprise to the war's developments. After witnessing the hatred on the Federation floor, he knew better than anyone I was right about their perspective.

"The Secretary-General understood the cradle's importance, as a propaganda tool," Jones said. "That's why we sent our first fleet on a liberation mission. We have a chance to defeat the Arxur, and retake the cradle. Those mission logs, and the footage which Captain Sovlin provided to us from Gojid media sources, might help mitigate any reputational damage."

Two items leapt out at me from that statement. The first being, the humans sent a large contingent of the Venlil ships that were donated to them to a slaughter. Attacking the Arxur was a foolhardy play, which I can't believe General Kam didn't object to. Predators or not, the UN had succumbed at every turn to the grays' superior army.

Are they trying to leave both of our planets exposed? To lose everything we gave them?

Since the fleet was already dead, there was no point even addressing that matter. I began to wonder if allying with humanity was a mistake; I hadn't thought they were suicidal.

The second topic was the name Sovlin, which I couldn't be hearing right. Even under excruciating interrogation, it was tough to picture that Gojid giving humanity anything helpful. Had they captured him during the war? What terrible retribution had they inflicted, to make him violate his principles?

"Sovlin is in your custody?" I blinked with concern, as the human representatives nodded. "Is he alive?"

Jones rolled her eyes. "Yes. Why does everyone ask that?"

"Because we wouldn't blame you for killing him, General. I might

venture he deserves the ultimate penalty. But how did he come into your possession?"

"He turned himself in, after witnessing our soldiers fight back against the Arxur."

"I, er…I see. Would it be an unreasonable request to ask for Sovlin to stand trial in a Venlil court? I would like him to answer for reckless endangerment, and mistreatment of a Venlil citizen."

"The UN is willing to discuss extradition, but he is a valuable strategic asset now. I don't see him being handed over for a few years." A female voice I didn't recognize piped up. This predator was seated away from the generals, and bore the keen visage of intelligence. "Erin Kuemper, UN Secretary of Alien Affairs. Formerly with SETI."

That agency name rang a bell in my head. Humans desired friends among the stars, long before their species was interstellar; stories about aliens were abnormally prevalent in their culture. Some Terran scientists devoted their careers to scanning the skies for signals, and cataloguing exoplanets that might be habitable.

Noah and Sara's flight on the *Odyssey* was charted by SETI researchers. Venlil Prime happened to be the fifth "Earth-like" world on their candidate list. It made sense that those prescient astronomers would try to become the first alien experts and attachés.

I flicked my ears with politeness. "Nice to meet you, Madam Secretary. I understand humans have the greatest claim to Sovlin, of course, but I don't want his treatment of Slanek to be overlooked. It's a bad precedent."

"Agreed. I think it's a good idea, for us to write out travel and extradition treaties. We've relied too heavily on goodwill between our species. This would nip any misunderstandings in the bud."

There were a lot of other details that needed to be ironed out; trade, borders, intelligence sharing, joint military bases, and which foods were allowed within our domain. It was a daunting task, since I had no idea how predators approached such matters. That fact that Earth technically fell in Venlil territory was a grievous issue I'd been tiptoeing around.

The official status, galaxy-wide, is that humanity does not own their

homeworld. We do, even if we renounce that stake between our two species.

Of course, the Venlil Republic would never lay claim to the Sol system. The unfortunate reality was that we didn't have the authority to hand out parsecs of space. The Federation would be hesitant to sign off on any territorial claims, and that was the best-case scenario. Recognizing the United Nations as a legitimate, spacefaring entity would be acknowledging humans as equals; encouraging them to spread throughout the galaxy.

I feared that our predator friends wouldn't take kindly to that fact, especially as they eyed colonial expansion initiatives. Decorous as humanity were, I didn't think they'd be happy sharing with their neighbors forever. They would want some breathing room, and space to call their own.

"Speaking of misunderstandings," Ambassador Noah rumbled. "Myself, and any human-allied species, might have a target on our back. It appears our shuttle was sabotaged, and that almost resulted in a catastrophic drive failure."

General Jones chuckled. "I'm amazed the xenos have the stones to think of subterfuge. They sure haven't shown it before now."

"The Venlil have risked their entire existence to protect ours. Is that not courageous? Let's not insult our friends." Secretary Kuemper shot the American a warning look, then gave me an apologetic smile. "I'm sure that was not her intention, Governor."

"No offense taken. But as Noah is about to mention, there was a second ship of representatives coming here. You sent out a search party already?"

The astronaut's eyebrows shot up. He must be stunned that I had discerned his thoughts with a half-glance. It was uncanny, at times, how I felt like I could sense what was on that predator's mind.

"Venlil and humans are scouring the edges of Zurulian space now. We expect them back in comms range, within the next few hours," Zhao answered.

Kuemper tilted her head. "Is there something more you wanted from us?"

"We would like the Yotul diplomat pulled aside for questioning, at the earliest convenience. He had an uncanny amount of knowledge

about the defect. But please, do so with tact. Without drawing outside attention."

The human officials shared a glance, before consulting the encyclopedia of known species on their holopads. It must be difficult, to recall the nuances and details of three hundred races they'd never met before. Perhaps a full briefing, on the friendly visitor races, should be led by our diplomatic corps.

General Kam cleared his throat. "I'll tell Venlil police to collect him, since you want it to slip under the radar."

"Thank you. And listen, media silence for now," I said. "We don't need this playing out in the court of public opinion."

Kuemper nodded. "I second that. Talk of conspiracies will sour any good news."

Silence fell over the room, as my military advisor forwarded the request to the appropriate agencies. The Terrans were browsing the Yotul's file, and seemed to home in on the details of their uplifting. It was easy to forget how new humans were to the galactic scene. As predators, they rarely seemed unprepared for anything.

My eyes fell on my holopad, awaiting the call that would bring news. It was unknown what happened to Recel and his passengers, but there was a sinking feeling in my stomach when I thought about it. Our interspecies relations were in a delicate position, to begin with; a tragedy was the last thing humanity needed.

It was in our best interest to hope the Kolshian pilot got lost.

Chapter 38

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 6, 2136

There was a heaviness in my heart, as the four diplomats were ushered into the briefing room. The Mazic had been creating quite the scene outside, accusing his human hosts of kidnapping Laulo. Apparently, no amount of tact could prevent that; the uplift's disappearance was noted within minutes. President Cupo's dramatic theories, that the predators intended to poke and prod every diplomat, were generating panic among the others.

That meant we had to brief everyone, about the sabotage and the missing craft. The information needed to be turned over to the media as soon as possible too, since Cupo's outburst occurred in front of live cameras. How could we persuade such a paranoid individual? His mind longed to believe that humanity was up to something.

I wasn't sure how much of this briefing the Sivkit would remember, given that she was drugged with a light sedative. The Mazic, who had been quite gentle with Axsely, had to carry her into the room. The humans couldn't breathe without spooking the fluffy representative. Noah had accused the Sivkit Grand Herd of having a poor choice of personnel, and I'd begun to agree.

I should order her to return home, and request that the Herd send someone else. With behavior like this, it's impossible to establish any relations with her species.

Tossa was oddly quiet, and her gaze darted across the waiting predators. Despite her disdain for uplifts, her snooty attitude slipped when Laulo disappeared from their ranks. The Nevok had been trying to hawk her planet's refined metals and microchips to any Terran that would listen, but now, that interest had subsided.

Even Chauson looked curious at why the Yotul had vanished from their ranks, though he had more of an inkling what was going on. We had told him, in no uncertain terms, that someone on the ship could be involved. A scientist of the Zurulian's intellect might put the pieces together.

“I *knew* from the beginning that we couldn’t trust you predators!” Cupo spat, as he took a seat on the floor. “You were just waiting to get us here to turn on us.”

Chauson’s whiskers twitched. “You should wait to hear what they’re going to tell you, before you start with that nonsense. It’s not what you think.”

“Wait, you know? So Tarva and Noah have been selecting who to spin their yarns with. Who to hide things from,” Tossa growled.

The Mazic president flared his trunk. “Half the shit that comes out of a human’s mouth is a lie! Who knows why they want to manipulate us, but I bet it’s about control. All their species has shown they care about is power!”

The UN diplomats fidgeted with their visors, clearly uncomfortable with the accusatory rhetoric. This couldn’t have been their expectation when they greeted the landing party. I winced, as I saw the anger on the Terran generals’ faces. They lacked the poise and the patience of their diplomatic counterparts; it was tough for them to shrug off insults.

“You know what: fuck the Federation. You can fuck right back off to your ship,” General Zhao stood from his chair, and leaned across the table toward the Mazic president. “All *you* care about is where a person’s eyes are on their head.”

General Jones reclined in her seat. “And these are the ‘friendly’ species, Zhao. Who needs enemies, with friends like these?”

Axsely’s chest was wracked with sobs, as the primates’ tone escalated. The military humans shifted their annoyance to the sniveling animal. Their binocular eyes smoldered with indignation; the generals’ tolerance for predator bigotry had been tested for the last time.

“And you, with the white pelt…you can’t even look at us! Why are you here?” the Chinese general spat.

Jones bared her teeth, intentionally pointing them at the Sivkit. “Get a grip. You’re embarrassing your race.”

To be honest, if the brunt of a human’s anger was directed at me, it would make me clam up too. When their jaw muscles were clenched, it showcased their flesh-tearing bite force. The lack of fur made the protruding bones and bulging veins more obvious;

translucent skin confined the rage bubbling beneath the surface.

I can tell they're in control, but I don't think any other alien can.

"THAT IS ENOUGH! All of you are acting like children!" I screeched. "Let's agree that we've all messed up, in one way or another. We shared our information with Chauson, because he's the only one not looking for an excuse to spout predator nonsense. You lot just proved my point."

Noah squeezed my paw under the table. "Also, you guys tend to freak out at the slightest sign of danger. It was hard enough to keep everyone calm on the ship."

The Nevok diplomat sighed. "You get one chance to explain yourselves. The truth."

"Anti-human plotters in the Federation tried to kill us all with a cooling shaft malfunction. Recel's ship is missing, probably for the same reason," I replied.

"We're trying to figure out who's responsible, and hold them accountable," Noah added.

Tossa snorted. "And you think it's little, primitive Laulo?!"

The Terran ambassador tensed beside me; clearly, recent events hadn't stopped his defensive reaction to any "primitive" jabs. I gave Noah a look that warned him not to interfere. He swallowed hard, and inhaled a series of deep breaths.

This was not the time for him to give the Nevok an earful. Especially when she was the most level-headed person here, not named Chauson.

I offered a non-committal tail swish. "We're suspicious enough to ask questions."

It was plain to see from the representatives' faces that they were worried about how those questions were being asked. I swiped a few buttons on my holopad, and cast the security feed of the cell to the projector. The marsupial was seated alone on a bench, with his head in his paws. It was the predators' suggestion, to let him wait for awhile; to "give him time to marinate", was their phrase.

I didn't like that wording. But as long as the humans didn't suggest physical harm, I was happy to let them try out their techniques.

The feisty uplift raised his head, and stared at the camera. "I know

you're listening, Ambassador Noah! I can see that red light blinking. I want to talk."

"Too bad. I don't," the astronaut muttered to himself.

The Mazic president settled down, once he saw the Yotul in pristine condition. I was surprised that he hadn't suggested that humanity could have staged the sabotage. Cupo was a strange case, and it was tough to pinpoint what he hoped to gain from diplomacy. Telling the Terran military, to their faces, that he thought all humans avaricious liars; that could only stem from remarkable disdain.

The fact that the leader came himself could be chalked up to an attempt at honorability. Cupo didn't want anyone else to die, for what he believed was a foolish gamble. Was it simply a desperation play, like he told Noah? I didn't know if he'd ever see humanity as anything more than predators.

General Jones tapped her earpiece. "Governor. A United Nations scout ship recovered a data buoy within the search perimeter. Almost missed it on sensors."

My ears perked up. Standard Federation vessels were equipped with two data buoys, which could be ejected if a ship was in distress. They contained information about a ship's function, and could be encoded with a message from the captain.

The buoy emitted a distress signal for a week, or as long as any nearby starlight replenished its power. Common scenarios for their usage included emergency landings, mechanical failures, or after sustaining damage in battle. It could offer insight to a vessel's fate, or point rescuers in the right direction.

I was uncertain whether to view a buoy's deployment as a positive, or a negative sign. It meant that the ship had incurred trouble, but it also meant Recel had been aware of the problem before a drive meltdown. Maybe they were in the process of mending considerable damage; all that mattered was whether they were alive.

"Alright. Was your team able to extract the data?" I asked.

"Yes. There appears to be a short video log included." Jones scrolled through the file archives, and tapped the mentioned item. "Shall I clear these interlopers out, so we can review what it says in private?"

My ears flattened against my head. "They're not 'interlopers.' At

some point, we have to start acting like friends. I'm counting on humanity to take the first step."

I muted the feed from Laulo's cell, and moved that window into background processing. The American general frowned, as I gestured to the projector. Her gaze drifted to the skeptical Mazic; that first impression didn't make her eager to share intelligence. There was no telling what was on the video file, and it might not take much for such individuals to jump to conclusions.

A smog-filled cabin was depicted on the projector, with a delirious Kolshian at the helm. Recel dabbed a damp rag against his forehead; the internal temperature must be sweltering. The smoke was so thick, that gray tendrils seemed to curl around the Federation officer's form. His orange eyes were listing and unfocused.

I glimpsed a few Federation diplomats behind him; all were wearing vac suits to avoid the toxins. That would only be good while the half-day's oxygen supply lasted. Upon closer inspection, Recel had set a helmet down, out of the camera's focus. He must've taken it off so that he could be seen and heard on the recording.

"This is Recel of the Kolshian Commonwealth. A few hours ago, we noticed signs of a fire in the warp drive compartment. With the core ablaze, repairs are impossible." The officer burst into a coughing fit, and paused to catch his breath. "Emergency shutdown has been unsuccessful. Once it reaches a certain temperature, it's going to go off like a bomb."

As panicked as Recel had been around humans, his tranquility in the face of impending death was remarkable. I don't know how he'd kept the diplomats calm, or why they hardly reacted to those words. It helped that their ship didn't have a predator around, to add fuel to instinctual fear. Still, perhaps we just couldn't hear their cries from beneath the suits?

The Kolshian pilot grimaced. "I know we have mere hours, at most, but I'm at peace with my death. I spent my final days seeking the first real chance the Federation's had at ending the war, in my lifetime. Isn't that a beautiful thought?"

Water swelled in my eyes, as the finality of their predicament sank in. Recel's contributions to galactic peace were monumental, and rarely received full acknowledgment. When push came to shove, he

found the courage to support humanity. It was his belief in diplomacy, encouraging us to attend the summit, that led Noah to speak to the Federation.

If it weren't for that heroic veteran, it would still be the two of us against the galaxy. Sovlin's actions could've been the catalyst for war. Humanity would've never seized the opportunity to voice their side of the story, or opened themselves up to new partners.

Recel might be the person who saved Earth. Who deserves as much credit as my dear Noah, I mused.

"There are some people who want to silence my version of events, regarding the torture of a human prisoner. I want it known that all I regret is that I didn't act sooner," he sputtered. "That I never had the courage to check in on Marcel, and apologize for my part in it. I hope he's doing well."

The Kolshian could hardly speak between coughing outbursts; his eyelids fluttered with exhaustion. He huddled over the console, and rested a grasper over the send button. The lack of clean oxygen had pushed him to the brink of unconsciousness.

Recel gritted his teeth. "Humans…if you see this, I remember what your leader said, about desiring co-existence. I hope people give you a chance, and that you won't lose faith. The things you endure would be too much, for any other species, but you're not them.

You're strong. You're predators. Maybe that is a good thing."

The Terran ambassador's mouth was agape with horror, as we observed Recel paw at his throat. This was someone we had traveled with for days, who offered his unique perspective on Federation history. It wasn't all that long ago the Kolshian greeted us in the hangar bay, and thanked Noah for reminding him what courage felt like.

"Agh…time's up," Recel whined, in a pained voice. "Kick some Arxur ass for me, humans. Leave a little less ugly in the galaxy. I have faith in you…."

The transmission cut out with a final beep, and was replaced by a grim static. The Federation diplomats looked aghast at what we just witnessed; even Axsely was showing signs of lucidity. The Terran generals dropped their scowls, and bowed their heads in a solemn display of grief. There was something sobering about a person's last

words.

“We have to help them!” Cupo spat. “Send a ship.”

Ambassador Noah nodded. “I will fly it myself if I have to. Those are our allies, and they’re in trouble.”

General Jones’ lips curved down. “This video is time-stamped three days ago. There’s no vessels on sensors. Only a few stray energy readings, which suggests…”

The only trace we’d find of the occupants was their atoms scattered across local space. Humanity’s first interactions with those six species, would be the unenviable task of explaining how their diplomats died. I didn’t know how we would convince their leadership not to fault the predators.

Condolences and words might not cut it. We need concrete proof.

The words the Krakotl uttered, that anyone who stood with humanity was dead to them, lingered in my ears. It was difficult for me to process that parties in the Federation would murder civilians, for the crime of speaking to predators. I wouldn’t blame our new allies for not wanting to believe it was their long-standing friends.

My claws flung the prison surveillance back onto the projector; I was trembling with outrage. A taped confession would be a start, even if others accused us of coercion.

“Forget waiting.” I switched on the intercom function, and leaned into my holopad. “Why did you betray us, Laulo? Why?”

The Yotul glanced up with a hopeful expression. “I’m so sorry. Saving our shuttle seemed like enough to spark gratitude. I just wanted to impress Noah, so humanity wouldn’t discard us…like everyone else.”

A chorus of gasps echoed from our Federation contingent. The predator generals looked mystified by his rationale, and their eyes narrowed to intimidating slits. None of us expected such a straightforward confession, especially when I was hoping we’d pegged the marsupial wrong.

“Impress me? You killed Recel, and almost killed us!” Noah snarled over my shoulder. “You’re a homicidal psychopath!”

Laulo blinked. “What? Were you not listening to what I said before? I…I didn’t do it. I just saw who did, and used the opportunity to,

um, prove myself."

The human squinted. "Why should we believe that? Why wouldn't you come forward straight away?"

Murmurs of agreement came from the alien diplomats. It was bizarre to see the Mazic nodding along to a Terran argument, but it was natural to suspect the Yotul's claim. On one paw, it seemed like a lousy attempt to dodge responsibility. On the other, it made more sense than an uplift plotting a complex, technological scheme.

"The Takkan representative saw them too, and tried to intervene. Didn't you wonder why one friendly species never made it to the shuttle?" Laulo hissed. "Besides, we were on their territory! If I spoke up sooner, we would've never left Aafa."

Confusion stirred in my chest. "You're saying it was…"

The uplift swished his tail. "The Kolshians wanted the human ambassador, and his friends, dead. Not me. Who would have unfettered access to the shuttles? Who planned the whole trip, and saw Recel as a loose end?"

I fell back on my haunches, stunned to silence. Those words synced with the facts a little too perfectly. If Laulo was telling the truth, a touch-DNA sweep by the core should corroborate it. However, it didn't add up, why an influential species would grant humanity a public audience and seek a military alliance, only to kill us.

Was it even possible for our predators to track down a Kolshian official, and demand answers? Chief Nikonus was secure, at the heart of Federation territory. As much as I wanted to avenge the fallen vessel, nothing good could come from blazing a trail of destruction.

My expertise would focus on the diplomatic side: salvaging our relations with the victimized species. The choice, of how to respond to a personal and cowardly attack, belonged to the humans.

Chapter 39

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 7, 2136

The battle for the cradle was decided in our unit's absence, hinging on the sheer force of human aggression. With a mix of bold tactics and innovation, the UN fleet was able to widen their numerical advantage. The enemy found themselves ganged up on, by a myriad of ship classes; every slight weakness was pinpointed and exploited.

Hundreds of Arxur fell by their railguns and missiles, and the entire formation was pushed back within a few hours. Defensive walls were dismantled by brazen, yet calculated charges. Hostiles were encircled and pinned down from every heading, unable to deal with all the Terran pests at once.

There were significant casualties on our side, but enough humans remained at the end of the dogfight. The grays were reduced to isolated, scattered pockets. This was a feat, if achieved by any other species, that would cement itself in folklore. It was the greatest victory in centuries of Federation warfare.

The Arxur vessels attempted to flee the system and regroup, but lighter Terran craft pursued them with relentless abandon. There was no mercy in a predator's hunt; there was only the kill. Even in victory, the humans wanted little more than to finish them off.

They are wired differently. They stare into the darkness, yet they do not flinch.

The remnants of the cradle were now beneath the humans' watchful eye. The omnivores had no intention of letting the Arxur back within orbital proximity; thus, the UN fleet lingered as a protective barrier against any secondary attack. They began transmitting messages to the battered surface, and organizing landing parties.

As for the captured cattle ship, that could offer plentiful intel. Technological access could allow humans to reverse-engineer the enemy's weapons and armor, or develop countermeasures. The Gojid victims and Arxur prisoners were brought aboard UN ships, wherever there was room. A large chunk were deposited back on the *UNS Rocinante,* the warship that started it all.

Captain Monahan was seated at her desk, when Carlos brought me to her office. The human officer was impassive and confident; it was no wonder her subordinates believed in her orders. She had no shortage of conviction or mental fortitude. Her capability under battle circumstances was undeniable.

“Ma’am.” I bowed my head in a respectful gesture, and the predator waved to a chair. “Thank you for allowing me to spectate your interrogation. I can’t wait to see the bastards squirm.”

She folded her fingers together, and studied me with piercing blue eyes. “My motives are entirely selfish, Sovlin. You could supplement any intel regarding the Federation, and brainstorm pertinent questions.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve wanted to get my paws on a gray for a long time.”

“And that’s why we’re watching from afar. It’s personal for you.” The human crossed her arms, and eyed my lengthy claws with concern. “Private Romero vouched that you can keep a level head. That you won’t interfere, or question our methods. Don’t prove him wrong.”

I stared at my guard, who seemed to take note of my confusion. We had conversed about my desire for their suffering, mere hours ago. Whatever a human did to an Arxur, my lips were sealed. Did they really think I, of all people, would take pity on those creatures?

There would be no moral argument from this Gojid. If the Terran military violated Earth’s conventions on torture, I thought it was justified. Those parameters weren’t designed for child-eating abominations.

“Listen, I know what your inclinations toward humans are,” Carlos grunted. “Our interrogators are trained to say whatever it takes to extract information from a subject. They might try to build rapport with that thing, by talking like ‘fellow hunters.’”

“Why?! How can you even pretend to be like them?”

Monahan rolled her eyes. “We want to keep one talking. Torture isn’t an effective methodology.”

Something about that matter-of-fact statement sent a chill down my spines. I think it was the implication, that inefficacy was the main argument against torture, rather than the ethical rationale other

humans offered. It sounded like her kind had dabbled in the art, after all…enough times to reach a scientific consensus.

"We're doing whatever it takes to stop them," Carlos added, with a throaty growl. "I just want to know that you won't misinterpret things. That you'll understand, if a human agrees with a vile statement on camera."

They're concerned I might fall for any acting that's geared toward the Arxur. These predators don't want me to accuse them of hiding their true intentions again.

"I disagree with your methods, but I understand." I met his brown eyes, and suppressed the ripple of fear that ensued. "It's your ship, your prisoners. You don't answer to a conscripted criminal."

Captain Monahan nodded. "Very well. Then I'll send the signal to begin."

The human swiped at her holopad with nimble digits. The viewport on the far wall morphed to a different image: an overhead angle of the Arxur's cell. A sturdy chain clung to the reptilian's leg, and allowed it to wander just far enough to sit at a metal table. It reminded me of the furnishings of my prison cell, when Anton explained my legal rights.

These savage predators shouldn't have legal rights. If I overheard a lawyer introduce themselves and talk about defense arguments, I was going to blow a gasket.

The door swung open, and a dark-haired human in military pelts ambled up to the table. His strides were too casual for my liking, as he plopped himself in a chair with a bored expression. A clawless hand drifted to his chin, and his eyes leveled with those of the monster.

Secondhand fear tugged at my heart, seeing the primate within lunging distance of the gray. The Arxur's imposing form was superior in every manner; its dagger-like teeth flashed with menace, as it studied the visitor. I don't know how the Terran could keep such a nonchalant demeanor. Could he really bank his life on a chain's integrity?

The reptilian prisoner unleashed a vicious snarl, without warning. The roar reverberated into the microphones; it was a bloodthirsty chord that sent my instincts into overdrive. The decibel level

directed into the primate's face must be enough to set his ears ringing and his skin tingling.

The human interrogator yawned. "Is that all? Are you done? I thought you wanted to talk, Captain."

A rattling noise came from the prisoner's chest, like two stones scraping against each other. The translator proclaimed it to be laughter. I didn't know how the human stayed fixed to his seat, let alone displaying a cue of boredom. His cadence was also unwavering.

"You are truly predators; I had to be certain," it barked. "That would be enough to make the feckless prey-folk piss themselves. They're little more than animals, you know."

The Terran flashed his, much flatter, teeth. "We know. The Gojids, they trampled each other the second our boots touched ground."

"Conquest is inefficient, but for your first prize, I presume…you wanted to be paws-on. We interrupted your hunt, and you did not appreciate us spoiling the fun."

"You saved us a lot of work, the way I see it. There is much to learn from your people, if you would honor us. I'm Ross."

"Captain Coth. What is it you wish to know?"

Thinking of the Arxur as self-aware individuals with names and ranks was too much. Ross' callous words stirred disgust in my chest as well; this predacious behavior was everything I imagined from his kind, in my prior adventures. The human tilted his head to one side, and I glimpsed an object in his earlobe. Despite his sinister words, he was still waiting for a cue from Monahan.

"Ask about first contact, and the events leading up to it," the Terran captain ordered.

Ross narrowed his eyes. "Tell me about the first time you met the Federation. What did they say? Why did you decide to hunt them? We want the full picture, of how this all started."

I blinked with puzzlement. This was a waste of a question; the humans knew how the war started. The reason they hunted us was because the grays were cruel, and they relished suffering. There was nothing new to glean from the tale of betrayal, and certainly nothing that would serve Terran military interests.

“Before the Federation arrived…well, to understand why those dimwits contacted us, you must know of the fourth world war,” Coth hissed. “You see, our regional powers always had competing interests. Does that concept register with you, or have I already lost you?”

The human scowled. “Our ‘nations’ still bicker to this day. Go on.”

“I see. The Northwest Bloc was a loose union of related cultures, which formed as a counterbalance to the Morvim Charter. The Bloc sought the reclamation of ancestral greatness, and built an army designed to subjugate middling states.”

“You’re saying the Bloc invaded its neighbors. Neutral ones.”

“Yes, precisely. The war was a drawn-out, bloody affair: as wars tend to be. The Bloc brought scientists in for genetic research. They wanted to find a way to select the best soldiers, so their army could be the strongest. That leads us to Laznel, or as he is known today, ‘the Prophet.’”

Captain Monahan narrowed her eyes, as though trying to decide where the reptile was going with this history lesson. I didn’t see how any details about a bloody war or politics were relevant. The Federation’s succinct summation, of a brutal culture that was bound to wipe itself out, was enough. The humans didn’t cut the creature off for some reason, and it was all I could do to listen to its grating tongue.

“A brilliant scientist, indeed. He theorized that certain bloodlines had a higher probability of strength and intelligence.” Coth tossed its truncated snout. “Laznel’s report to the Bloc Council was published under the name ‘Betterment’, and it is mandatory reading today. The Prophet rose through party ranks, eliminating persons of lesser races, health, dispositions and creeds from the citizenry.”

It looked like recognition, which flickered in the interrogator’s eyes, but it was gone a second later. Carlos’ breath hitched for a moment, and Monahan’s jaw tightened as well. I had no idea why such an unthinkable story would resonate with the humans. The Arxur just admitted their people’s *hero* was forged from the genocide of their own populace!

Ross leaned forward. “What did the Morvim Charter think of this…‘Betterment’ philosophy?”

“They thought it was too radical. That was when the war truly became about destruction; making sure the other side was crippled or erased. In the wake of several cities’ decimation, the Federation arrived. Their initial message was they were here to ‘save us’, and then, they dumped their technology to our databanks.”

“I think I understand. The Bloc used that technology to end the Charter, then turned their guns on the stars.”

“Not at all. The Bloc and the Charter signed a peace treaty, and began delving through the aliens’ gifts. We didn’t want a war with hundreds of species, who at the time, were centuries more advanced. The Federation promised their own betterment plan, but would never contact us directly. We didn’t know why, then.”

My eyes widened, as I observed how the humans were listening with rapt attention. This was an obvious distortion of the truth! The Arxur, signing peace treaties? As if that were even possible.

A growl rumbled in my throat, which earned me a warning look from Carlos. The guard had warned me not to interfere, but it stung to watch them record deception. This grotesque predator was lying through its fangs; I didn’t know how the Terrans could be impervious to the decadent hunger in its eyes.

“Anyhow, their medicine and the unprecedented peace meant people were living longer,” Coth continued. “Our food supply couldn’t keep up with the growing populace. We asked the Federation for help. They offered two concoctions: one for our livestock, and one for ourselves. We mass-produced them, and rushed distribution.”

“Without any trials?”

“We trusted the aliens. They said it would cure hunger…and people were starving. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers took those Arxur doses, and the livestock one was sent to every major farm. Take a guess what happened next?”

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“The livestock began dying from a highly-transmissible, lethal disease. As for the Arxur test subjects, they were infected with a microbe that made them allergic to meat. Here’s a simple question, Ross. What happens to obligate carnivores, when they can’t consume meat?”

“They starve.”

“Correct. Every volunteer was dead within a month. The Federation simply responded how pleased they were…that we were cured of our desires. Their intent was to force us not to be predators; like it were a choice.”

My mouth opened to protest, and Carlos slapped a hand over my lips. I struggled against his grip, coughing out muffled words behind his oily palm. There wasn’t a sliver of truth in this far-fetched tale. The Federation wasn’t an organization that went around bioengineering killer diseases; we reached out to the Arxur out of kindness.

Why is Coth lying to them? Is it trying to use humanity in its conquests? Perhaps the Arxur noted that these primates feel empathy, so they’re using standard manipulation tactics.

The UN interrogator hesitated. “Okay. What does your ‘prophet’ Laznel have to do with any of this?”

“We had to make choices, about who lived or who died. All nations, including the Charter, finally embraced and expanded upon Laznel’s thinking. The individuals with the highest markers for aggression and violence were chosen as survivors, and the rest of our population was culled.”

“What about the Federation?”

“We studied them, and learned how they eradicated predators on their worlds. Someone got the idea to make them our cattle, and use that to scrape by. It’s fittingly ironic…it is revenge.”

“You didn’t think of grabbing their non-sentient animals?”

“The prey-folk are the most populous species on their worlds. They breed incessantly. Besides, they destroyed their wildlife populations. The idiots wiped out most large animals on their planet; including any ‘herbivores’ that got caught munching on roadkill.”

Captain Monahan signaled for Carlos to release me, and his slimy palm uncorked from my mouth. The human officer met my eyes, but there was a new emotion brewing in her pupils. She was scrutinizing me, like she thought I was hiding something.

Irritation coursed through my veins, and I bared my teeth in

contempt. This was ridiculous! The predators couldn't turn on us because of a flimsy tale, from a subject who laughed at sharing and slavery hours ago.

"Pause the interview," the captain spoke into her holopad. "So, the Federation gave Nazis space tech, then pushed everyone to follow them through starvation? Pure lunacy."

"The Arxur are sadistic monsters! This interview was a mistake," I snarled. "You have seen them throw children in cages, chow down on people while they are alive, yet you are considering their lies? I thought humans were better than this."

Monahan returned a challenging stare. "Your viewpoint is duly noted. Romero, your thoughts?"

"It's something we should investigate. If it is true, the Federation erased it from their history books," Carlos replied. "But, I am certain Sovlin believes the public narrative, and so do the common people. Any deception on his part is unintentional."

I gaped in disbelief. "Deception?! You speak like you believe that *thing*!"

"Look, it doesn't change the atrocities they committed, buddy. Humanity just wants the truth, whatever that may be; we can't work with half the facts," he growled. "Why is there no documentation of first contact? Unless you're hiding something, why shouldn't we look?"

Captain Monahan nodded. "Agreed. From the Federation's perspective, they could think they were blindsided. They see predation as some form of wicked corruption."

I cast a sullen glance at the video screen. The pleasure of the fleet's victory was short-lived; as was any notion that these primates offered a reliable source of protection. My desire for friendship with the Terran guard was gone; in its place, was a blistering pain.

After everything the Arxur had taken from me and my people, it felt like a personal betrayal, for these humans to place blame on us.

Chapter 40

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 8, 2136

No matter how often I replayed the Arxur's words in my head, I couldn't understand why the Terran observers would trust them. It was at the humans' clutches that the traumatized refugees were nursed back to health. They risked life and limb, and lost hundreds of ships in pursuit of our survival. How could they reconcile what they'd seen with the prisoner's narrative?

The primates had loathed every aspect of the cattle ship, and acted distraught at the condition of the victims. I had wondered how one could tell when a predator was truly hungry, until I saw the darkness in their eyes that day. There was a bottomless abyss of rage inside their pupils; it was a much-needed reminder of human volatility.

My service on this vessel was for nothing, I bemoaned. *What if humans decide to give the cattle back? Have I just helped the Arxur land a game-changing ally?*

The door to my quarters clicked open, and a weary Carlos strode in with a vegetable platter. He placed the tray on the bedside table, without any sort of apology. The food was soaked in some clear fluid; it felt viscous against my claws as I poked it. Had the omnivores coated the plants in an animal secretion? Maybe it was saliva, or worse…ugh.

"Why the fuck are these vegetables wet?" I snarled, with as much hostility as I could muster. "Disgusting."

Carlos crossed his arms. "It's olive oil, Sovlin. Relax. You might even like it; lots of healthy plant fats."

"I don't want anything from you…predator." I grabbed an orange-colored slice, and flung it at his cheek. The human barely reacted, only wiping the oil off with his chest-pelt. "If you still feel empathy, shoot me now. Before I watch your kind turn on every species with a semblance of decency."

"You're overreacting. And you are *not* going to refer to me as

‘predator’ again.”

“Why not? You defended the fucking Arxur, then accused me of deception! I don’t want to see your face.”

“Just listen to me, alright? Sixty seconds.”

Renewed disgust flared in my chest, as the guard’s binocular eyes pleaded with mine. I knew humanity didn’t want sapient livestock of their own, but defending the act made them equally culpable. No moral race would rewrite the tragedy of first contact and the unspeakable losses that befell every species.

The image from my nightmare, of Carlos roasting me over a fire, seemed much more realistic. He just proved that he could see Gojids as food. This man…beast was a traitor to sapientkind, and yet, I had grown attached to him. What happened to throwing the Arxur in the cattle pens, ‘where they belonged?’

I slashed my claws across a pillow several times, and struggled not to turn them on the human. “I will never agree with you. Don’t waste your breath.”

“I’m not asking you to agree with me. I’m asking you to understand.” Carlos eyeballed the decimated pillows, as fluff was flung across my form. “Look, I listened to your spiel on torturing an innocent human, and tried to empathize with you. Don’t you think you can at least try to see where I’m coming from?”

“The grays are your fellow predators. They’re more like people to you than us.”

“This isn’t about the Arxur, Sovlin. It’s about the Federation and how they’ve treated us. The prejudice and the hatred.”

“That is because of the grays. They won’t stop until we’re destroyed! Erased!”

“But can’t you see how it looks from our side? Why we would think you’re capable of killing and terrorizing predators, when you’ve been hellbent on our extinction since you discovered us?”

I chewed at my claws, considering the welcome that humanity had received to the galaxy. Governor Tarva had made them aware of the Federation’s extermination plans; the only reason their species still lived was due to misinterpreted sensor data. The second their survival was discovered, the entire organization convened to discuss

a raid on Earth.

There were entire religions formed around the eradication of predators, including the one on my world. Most individuals the UN tried to contact rejected the idea that humans could be civilized. This was typically due to the belief that their ilk were incapable of empathy, cooperation, or basic bonding. My experiences proved the error of that prior research.

In Carlos' paws, I would definitely resent the Federation. Maybe it would seem within the realm of possibility, that we had done a similar thing to other predators.

"I guess. But I know better than to believe an Arxur's lies," I growled. "However bad you think they are…they're worse."

The human lowered his eyes. "I'm not saying Coth is telling the truth. I'm saying he could be, because I know how much you hate our existence. I'll believe whatever the evidence says."

"Then I'll help you prove it wrong. Only because I am sorry for what the Federation has done to humans. I regret how much it has soured your opinion of us…and I know my part in that."

"That's all I ask. Are we cool?"

"Yes."

"Good. Because the captain wants to see you, and I don't want to explain that you're pouting."

"I am not pouting!"

The predator's lips adopted a slight curvature, which seemed indicative of amusement. I was beginning to understand how Slanek could read emotions in their snarls; it was just a way of compensating for their missing tails. Did humans ever envy that additional appendage that the rest of us took for granted? It was a miracle they were so graceful and balanced without it.

I shoveled a pawful of vegetables down my gullet, then dismounted from my bed. Carlos steered us back toward Monahan's office, and we traversed the ship corridors in a comfortable silence. Amazement rippled through me, as I realized my spines were lying flat. The second I noted my proximity to the predator, they returned to full bristle.

Yikes…that is starting to hurt. Why did I have to think about it?

The doors to our destination slid open, and distracted me from the latest dose of fear chemicals. The UN captain was reviewing one clip when we entered, a curt exchange between Coth and Ross. Her eyes were bloodshot, like she had been poring over footage all night. Humans could be obsessive, that was for certain.

"—want peace? What do you see as acceptable end conditions for the war?" the Terran interrogator asked.

"You don't get it. There is us and them." Saliva oozed from the reptilian captain's fangs as it spoke. "There can only be peace when every Federation planet is dead. That is acceptable."

Ross narrowed his eyes. "What if that is not acceptable to us?"

"Then you're stupider than I took you for, and you'll die with the Federation. You can watch the prey-folk neuter your race before your extinction."

Captain Monahan punched some notation into her holopad. Her sigh sounded flustered, but she didn't seem concerned by the extermination threat. If I didn't know better, I would think that question had been aimed at finding out if diplomatic avenues between us and the grays were possible.

"So there would be no room for negotiation?" the UN interrogator pressed. "Humanity cares for one alien species above all others. They are a part of our pack, and we will not abandon them."

Coth thought for a moment. Its pupils darted from side to side, as if it were scanning its memory banks. The cold intelligence on display was appalling, and the Terrans' reckless divulgence alarmed me. Humans were painting a target on Venlil Prime, if they publicized that alliance to the enemy.

Poor Tarva. The species she saved from certain death is trying to get her killed in return. Careless, idiot monkeys.

"The Venlil," Coth decided. "You've got to be kidding. That explains their thwarting what should've been a simple border raid."

Ross was quiet. The human maintained eye contact, and waited for the prisoner to continue. He did not confirm or deny the reptilian's guess, which was affirmation of itself.

The Arxur slammed its snout against the table. "One of the weakest, most frightful species of them all. The Venlil are beneath you!"

“That is for us to decide.”

“Surely you see that they’re a liability to you? What use could they be? You referred to them as packmates, not food or slaves. That means equals.”

“I meant what I said, Coth. An attack on them is an attack on us. We would die for them, happily.”

“But why?”

“Because they defended us from the Federation, despite the fact that we’re predators. They were the only ones who helped us. Humanity would never repay such a debt with anything less.”

The Arxur shook its head, huffing with disgust. The abomination was repulsed by the interrogator’s soft rhetoric; this was Ross’ worst miscalculation yet. Still, it was a relief to hear that the humans would stand by the Venlil, if nothing else. I thought they were ashamed of their prey friends for a moment.

A growl rumbled in Coth’s throat. “What is it you’re asking? We could discuss sparing one species, if that’s what you require to join us.”

“That, and the release of every Venlil held as livestock, unharmed,” the human barked.

“You expect us to give up millions of cattle we already have? We’re starving as is. Surrendering any of our existing food supply is a nonstarter.”

Captain Monahan tapped a button on her console, and the video feed paused. I knew she was the one who directed the interrogator to barter over lives, like any mundane commodity. She hadn’t even reacted to the premise of Venlil as food. These familiar faces were leaning into their predator roots a bit too much, ever since they started interacting with the grays.

Fortunately, this foray had gone nowhere; that last statement sealed the finality of a diplomatic impasse. The Arxur would never part ways with their precious quarry, by Coth’s own admission. Regardless, the offer to spare the Venlil further harm was empty talk. The predator would say whatever it thought afforded the best chance of escape.

Would the humans abandon this folly now? It was insulting that

they would even pose such questions.

Monahan sighed. “Well, it’s a start. The Federation said the grays were incapable of negotiation.”

“You’re negotiating on whether your *best friends* deserve to have their pups tortured and hunted for kicks?” I spat incredulously.

“Sovlin! You are out of line.” Carlos tugged at my scruff, which snapped my attention to his flabbergasted expression. “She doesn’t answer to you. You said it yourself.”

“It’s alright,” Monahan growled. “If we rescue every enslaved Venlil, I don’t imagine Tarva will care how we achieve it. Especially if that option would negate years of suffering for those people, and save Earth significant loss of life.”

The UN guard narrowed his eyes. “There is a reason we get along with Tarva. Her government is actually reasonable.”

Implying that mine is not.

Irritation swelled in my chest. “So you’re really moving forward with this plan?”

“Nothing has been decided, Sovlin, because it’s not my decision. My job is to weigh options for the UN, and to see if talking is even a possibility. Turns out, it just might be,” the Terran captain replied.

“You didn’t even mention Gojids, or any other species to Coth. Let’s say you save the Venlil. Then, you’re just gonna let everyone else rot?”

“Humanity does not believe any sapient deserves such treatment. We would never be involved with or agree with those practices.” Monahan raised her eyebrows, emphasizing her predatory gaze. “However, if we can only save one race, you should understand why the Venlil are our top priority.”

“It’s still wrong. I refuse to help you trade lives… and bargain with those demons!”

“Good thing that’s not why I summoned you, then. Now that we control the cradle, we’d like your help with the Gojid refugee crisis. They belong with their colonies or the Federation, but it’s not so simple.”

There was no need for further explanation from the captain. I grasped the dilemma that humanity was facing. It wasn’t as easy as

flying this ship to the nearest Gojid colony and dropping them off. An inbound Terran transport would draw shoot-to-kill missile fire, no matter how slow their approach or polite their hail. The same problem would occur at any Federation outpost.

Using the Venlil as a courier may not work either. They're considered predators by association, at this point.

However, with the humans potentially in cahoots with the Arxur, we had to get the Gojid refugees out of their custody at once. Judging by the reaction to Coth's interview, the primates were susceptible to corrupting influences. It didn't take much to warp their good intentions, and rope them into a dastardly scheme.

The more I pondered it, the enemy's motives could stretch beyond escape. The offer of an alliance might be genuine, since the UN impressed so thoroughly in their early engagements. Humans had the power to decide the conflict for either side, and would only grow more dangerous with time.

The Federation needed to straighten up our act, and make sure the Terrans stayed in our corner. I had to do whatever was in my power to convince our galactic allies not to follow Gojid mistakes. Antagonizing Earth made the child-eaters look more palatable, even to noble soldiers like Monahan and Carlos. Adding a second predator to the Arxur side would turn this war into a demolition.

"Then we contact both my people and the Federation," I decided. "I still have some sway."

Monahan grimaced. "How do we speak to your people? Your settlers might need to relocate; we don't have the resources to protect this region long-term."

"I'll tell you how to reach Gojid government channels. If they still exist, that is… be warned, they probably don't. The last I heard, the designated bunker was looking shaky."

Carlos rubbed his neck anxiously. "Doesn't your Prime Minister hate us?"

"Piri had a change of heart. She would be a useful witness with the Federation, regarding this whole debacle. Short of that, I'm probably your best mouthpiece. You know, being one of the few surviving and well-known Gojids."

"You're the best? We're doomed," the UN guard groaned.

Monahan chuckled. “Let’s see if the PM’s alive before we pronounce our political death, Romero.”

“Look what you’ve got your captain thinking. Political death?” I glowered at Carlos, knowing intimidation would have no effect. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

He flashed his teeth. “No problem!”

Whatever the Terrans might think of my reliability, the remnants of the Gojidi Union needed to do our part. Right now, the Venlil were the only incentive for Earth and her citizens to risk their hides. That needed to change, before it was too late.

I was going to impress upon anyone that would listen that humans were a species worth saving; even if we were saving them from their predator selves.

Chapter 41

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 8, 2136

When the science officer from humanity's first contact team reached out about a fear study, I was a bit intimidated. Sara Rosario had done extensive biological and environmental analysis, and collaborated with Venlil scientists throughout their early behavioral research. Her talks comparing our psychology racked up millions of views, as did her controversial analysis on Venlil ecosystems.

In a nutshell, Terran "conservationists" were less than thrilled with our biome manipulation. Sara had lambasted our efforts to wipe out predator species, and discussed something she referred to as "trophic cascades". The aspects she attributed to the absence of hunters were far-fetched, though she spoke at length about supposed examples from Earth.

How could removing a terrestrial predator alter the ocean, destroy vegetation, or spread diseases? Humans can prove their own worth without grasping at straws; these arguments are just moronic.

Besides her fringe theories, Sara was a remarkable scientist, with credentials in several fields. If anyone could find a way to break Venlil fear responses, it would be her. I knew the process could be traumatic, but I would do anything to leave my internalized feelings behind once and for all. I was tired of failing to protect my human friends.

"Are you sure about this, Slanek?" Marcel growled, as we approached the scientist. "If you're trying to be more human to appease me, please don't. I accept you for you."

I squeezed my tail around his wrist. "Thanks, but I'm doing this for myself. I'm tired of being scared, and at the whims of my instincts."

Tyler patted me on the back, a little harder than I would've liked. The blond human accompanied our group to assist with any physical activities, since Marcel was still in recovery from his gunshot wounds. The UN military was involved with these experiments, so I knew part of it was seeing if I could be shaped into a proper soldier. Dread festered already, knowing simulated combat was in my future.

“Why do you keep helping me, Tyler? We haven’t known each other long, and you must have other things to do,” I said.

“Dude, I wanted to be in the buddy program, just like you two. The UN turned me down.” The soldier towered over me, and his blue eyes glittered like ice crystals. “They didn’t think I would mesh with the Venlil, I guess. Too tall and too scary.”

Marcel frowned. “You were turned down ’cause you’re not vegetarian. Though your stature probably doesn’t help your case.”

“Aliens are the most exciting thing to ever happen to mankind. I want to be a part of this all, but maybe they were right. I always stick my foot in my mouth with the Venlil.”

I studied the flesh-eating soldier, imagining I had never seen a human before. Marcel was a daunting hunk of muscle when I first glimpsed him. His shadow smothered me, and his forward-facing eyes were like spotlights peering down from above. It was only seeing him at his most vulnerable, cold and afraid, that squashed that threatening aura.

That said, my friend barely came up to Tyler’s shoulders. The sandy-haired soldier was tall, even by human standards. His dietary choices would’ve given everyone at the outpost the creeps. It was likely something would be blurted out about dogs and persistence hunting, at a stage when his partner wasn’t ready to accept that.

Still, there were a lot of good memories to be formed with Tyler, if you could see past the bulky predator. He was friendly to a fault, considering my emotions at times when I was harsher than he deserved. There was selflessness in the way he didn’t hesitate to carry me off the cradle. I hoped other Venlil would give him a chance someday.

I nuzzled against his arm, which startled the big guy. “I appreciate you, Tyler; your heart is in the right place. Don’t give up. Appearances aren’t everything.”

“That was actually… sensitive and thoughtful.” Marcel feigned a gasp, and I giggled as the whites of his eyes expanded to cartoonish dimensions. “Who are you, and what have you done with Slanek?”

“Oh, shut up! You humans are a lot to take in, and you know it!”

Tyler placed a hand on his hip, striking a goofy pose. “Well, take it *all* in, buddy. Appearances are worth something. 210 pounds of

glorious, rugged—"

"Yeah, yeah, you're the pinnacle of male perfection," Marcel snorted, shoving the other soldier with his good arm. "Keep walking! The Secretary-General doesn't want to see that."

The Secretary-General? Why would Meier be here?

I followed my human's gaze, and surveyed the Terran scientists camped by the machines. Sara was taking an inventory of her equipment, while other predators were staring at us. My nerves flared, as I realized most humans present were in military uniforms. I knew these experiments would have combat applications, but I didn't think martial leaders were calling the shots.

Secretary-General Meier looked less amused with my pack's antics than I was; tomfoolery was not his favorite pastime. He was in a heated discussion with several people in green-and-brown uniforms. The color scheme looked like a tree threw up on it, but they didn't seem the type that would appreciate such comments.

Sara waved us over to her. "Long time no see, Slanek. Glad you're back in one piece."

"Uh, I'm hoping to s-stay that way? Why are all these important pred…humans here?" I squeaked.

She lowered her eyes. "There's no easy way to say this, but I'm afraid our work will have to move much faster than I anticipated. We don't have much time."

"You heard the news from Venlil Prime?" Secretary-General Meier interjected.

Marcel nodded. "We did. Ambassador Williams is alive, and he returned with some new friends."

I was glad my human piped up, because this ambush had thrown me off my prepared responses. Was this about helping our new allies with their own first contact programs? Maybe trying to create an easier bonding process?

"The picture of the Zorlin—" Tyler began.

"Zurulian," Sara and I corrected at the same time.

"—Zurulian on the human's shoe is everywhere. My man was just like, 'Oh, a predator?' Looks like a warm, comfy pillow to me."

Secretary Meier breathed an irritated sigh. “The other news. The Krakotl are leading a crusade against us, and we have less friends than foes. Not that even our ‘friends’ are likely to help. Simple math dictates that we’re at a numerical disadvantage.”

“The thousands of ships the birds’ve been massing represent a multi-species coalition,” one of the uniformed personnel chimed in. “Projections indicate that they’ll set sail today, and arrive on October 16th or 17th.”

Horror coursed through my veins, as the gravity of the Terrans’ revelations set in. How could these humans be so calm at the prospect of an attack on Earth? Marcel and Tyler both were subdued, but their reaction wasn’t on the level it should be. This was a raid with the intention of turning their verdant home into a barren rock; the same as the Arxur’s vile tactics.

The Krakotl were one of the few species that could head a functional offensive. They boasted a high aggression, since they evolved to scare off predators. During the initial phases of the Arxur war, the avians conjured up the technology that allowed us to regroup. While nobody was on the humans’ level, they possessed some tactical acumen.

“W-why not launch a pre-emptive strike? Like you did with the Gojids?” I demanded.

Meier frowned. “It’s too late now, but it wouldn’t have worked. Most of their ships were already space-borne, so we couldn’t catch them sleeping like the Gojids. They concentrated forces around their stations heavily.”

“But you’re excellent fighters. You have advanced ships now. Nobody can rival a predator’s military prowess.”

“They outnumbered us ten-to-one, if we sent the entirety of our *fledgling* armada. They also had home-turf advantage, and orbital lasers around every base. You might as well launch the UN fleet into a supernova; you’d get the same results.”

Sara sighed. “Our best hope was for Noah to convince them to stand down. That didn’t work out.”

I turned my gaze toward Marcel, noticing how his gaze drifted to his holopad. My human’s thoughts were transparent at times. He was worried about the welfare of Nulia and Lucy, who remained

back at his residence. The Gojid child would never feel safe again, if she watched another world endure destruction.

That's if anyone survives the attack on Earth. The entire human race is in jeopardy, I realized. *We need to get everyone off-world, before it's too late.*

I pinned my ears against my head. "You know the Krakotl are coming. There's still time. Evacuate Earth!"

"And go where? Anyone who wishes to leave will have the opportunity, including you," the Secretary-General growled.

"This is our home; we've built everything here. It's the only planet we've got." Marcel ruffled the stray tuft on my head, gentle and reassuring as ever. "Us soldiers, we're going to stay and fight."

"No!" I shrieked. "Come with me to Venlil territory. We'll take care of you…all of you. Please, don't die, humans."

"It's okay, buddy. Go back to your world. I want you to be safe."

Tears rolled down my face, at the thought of Marcel perishing by a Krakotl horde. It brought back unwanted memories; like the scorching pain in my chest, when I thought he was about to be shot in front of me. We had been to hell and back together, and it had finally seemed like our lives could settle down.

Now, without warning, the light at the end of the tunnel was extinguished. If Sara's team were cancelling my experiment, I understood. Humans had bigger things to worry about than my fragile instincts.

"Scrap the study. It's not a priority." I rubbed a paw against my cheek, catching the water rolling down my fur. "You don't have to worry about diplomatic fallout from me. I want to fight with you."

Meier shook his head. "We can discuss integration to a UN vessel, if the results of your training are positive. However, I recommend that you lend that option some serious thought, as high casualties are expected."

"I appreciate that humans honor your word, but you do not have time to fix me. Don't waste—"

"This study is very important, Slanek, for the survival of our species." The Secretary-General crossed his arms, a calculating scowl on his face. "Look, if Earth falls, the Venlil will be custodians

of the few remaining humans. It will be up to you to rebuild our population, and to protect our survivors from threats."

"Don't talk like that. Please!"

"I have to. Our research could point you in the right direction, and make your soldiers stronger."

"If things don't work out for us, this is humanity's parting gift," Sara finished. "I speak for all of us in saying that I hope the Venlil prosper."

My tail drooped between my legs, and it was all I could do not to collapse in defeat. The Terrans' odds of defending such an onslaught were slim; every human I knew could be dead in little over a week. Hearing the UN leader speak as if that probability was likely, crushed my hopes that the Sol system had some predatory tricks tucked away. Their species didn't deserve this fate.

The humans faced their impending doom with fearlessness, so I needed to accept reality too. If my participation strengthened the Venlil military in the UN's absence, I would do whatever was asked of me. No matter the mental duress this exacted on me, it was worth it.

I swallowed hard. "Thanks for telling me yourself, sir. Where do we begin?"

Sara rummaged through a box of her belongings, and retrieved a red fabric sleeve. It took all of my willpower not to shy away as she tugged it over my face. Her curved nails waded through my fur like daggers. I couldn't see at all for a split second, which added to the panic. How could placing coverings on my head impart anything?

They have to have a good reason. These predators will not hurt you. Humans will never hurt you, I repeated internally.

The human scientist was gentle as she tugged a pair of straps behind my ears. My vision returned, as two cutouts fell over the eyes' positioning. It felt like I was suffocating in the mask, but the fit was correct enough. Was it custom-made to my dimensions? Its purpose must lie beyond adding color to my silver fur.

I realized that something was wrong with my sight, as soon as I processed my surroundings. Where I had seen Tyler standing beside me, there was only a dark shadow. Marcel's comforting snarl was obscured as well. This headgear had barriers to take away my

periphery. Was this what it was like, to have predator sight?

Sara clapped her hands. “Perfect.”

“You good, Slanek?” Marcel’s voice echoed from my left, and I had to turn my head to look at him. The motion felt alien. “You look miserable…like a fish out of water.”

It was tough to describe how it felt, to be unaware of the objects in my vicinity. Simply carrying out a conversation was unnatural. No wonder humans got jumpy, if I came up beside them without thinking. Something could sneak up behind me now, and I wouldn’t realize it was there until it pounced.

“I’ll survive,” I grumbled. “You’re going to make me calmer, Sara, by limiting my vision? No offense, but I thought limited optical range was a downside to being human.”

“Your instincts are triggered by things approaching from the side or behind you. You’re easily distracted by your surroundings, because you see too much at once. I think this’ll help your spook reflex, to focus on a single target at a time.”

“I get it. Like horse blinders,” Tyler stated, in a glummer tone than usual.

Like what? Maybe I’m making the wrong inference again, but it sounds like they’ve tried to force their tunnel vision on other prey animals.

The scientist nodded. “Precisely. Slanek, why don’t we try a combat simulator with the blinders? If it doesn’t help, or you really don’t like it, we’ll drop it.”

“Fine.”

Sara steered me into a separate room with a light touch. The enclosed space appeared to be an imitation of a patrol ship cabin, complete with controls and sensor readouts. Where the viewport should sit, there were blank screens; I imagined they would reflect Arxur ships in a few minutes.

Tyler squeezed into the copilot’s seat, a downcast expression on his face. The tall human knew we could be in a dogfight that was very real, a short time from now. The stakes of our next mission would be his entire planet.

This flight presented no tangible threat, and I needed to keep that fact at the forefront of my mind. Somewhere deep inside my soul,

there had to be some bravery lurking. All that mattered was gaining admission to the UN's last stand, and proving that prey genetics didn't define us.

These virtual enemies were going to have hell to pay.

Chapter 42

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 8, 2136

The humans instructed me to place a wraparound headset over my ears. I was impressed with how they had modified their technology with Venlil in mind, though I hoped I wasn't the only one who would get to use it. The earpiece fed simulated audio of alarms and hits; it also allowed Sara to speak to me directly.

"Slanek, I'm going to talk to you throughout this exercise. In time, I hope you will learn to do these things yourself," she explained, in a melodic voice. "Thoughts guide our actions. By changing your thoughts, you can unlearn negative behaviors."

I tilted my head. "But that's the problem. You can't control your thoughts."

"Well, not with that attitude. You didn't develop your thinking patterns overnight," Sara responded. "It takes time, effort, and understanding to make a self-adjustment. Mind if I ask you a few questions, before we begin the simulation?"

"Go for it."

"When was the first time you encountered a predator?"

I failed to see the relevance of the question, but I decided to humor the human. If she thought delving into the origins of predator phobia would further her understanding, it wouldn't hurt to play along. The more background info she had on me, the better subject I would be.

You saw the Arxur on TV, but that doesn't really count. Mother tried to shield us from those atrocities, I recalled.

Encounters with predators were uncommon on Venlil Prime, though occasionally, one slipped through the cracks. Teams of investigators in armored vehicles would travel out to the site, scorching any area with evidence of a hunter's presence. There was no way we would leave them alive to reproduce and terrorize our settlements. Extermination officer was an occupation that paid well, but all the money in the world wouldn't be enticing enough for me.

"My parents took me for a walk in the local pasture, and there was

a dead rodent on the sidewalk. Lots of blood. There were larvae all over it; news cameras turned up within minutes." A shudder rippled down my spine at the memory. "The anchors said a predator might be on the loose. The entire neighborhood was placed on a curfew by local police. Schools were closed indefinitely."

Tyler couldn't hear the other end of the conversation, but he shot me a baffled look. The human's eyebrow arched up his forehead, as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. I think the words he mouthed were, *What the fuck?*

"Tell me more about that. Did they find out what happened to the dead animal?" Sara inquired.

I gritted my teeth. "It died of natural causes, according to the autopsy. Everyone was relieved that there was no imminent threat. But that was the week I learned about food chains…and our place on it."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Scared. Powerless. I just couldn't believe there were animals that based their existence on k-killing."

"I can tell this is difficult for you, Slanek. If I may, what conclusions did your childhood self reach about predators?"

"Predators had to be cruel and unfeeling, to be able to stomach such violence. To *eat* that rotting corpse I saw."

"The Arxur must have cemented those beliefs. I take it that was your initial feeling toward humans?"

A horrified gasp came from my chest, as I realized what I just said about predators. It had slipped my mind that I was talking to one, while I was focusing on the emotional residue of that experience. There was the thoughtlessness Marcel teased me over.

"I'm sorry, that was too honest. I didn't mean to say you're—" I squeaked.

"Relax. I'm not offended." Sara's voice was reserved and soothing, like the rustle of leaves in the wind. "I want you to be transparent with me; especially about how humans make you feel."

"I don't like to think about humans being predators. It's jarring to equate you with, uh…"

"The animal in the field. With eating 'rotting corpses.'"

“Yes.”

The scientist was silent on the other end of the headset, and I caught some light scraping sounds. She must be taking notes from what I was telling her. I hoped I hadn’t said too much; the humans wouldn’t admit they were offended, even if they were.

“You did great, Slanek. Thank you for sharing that with me. What I am going to ask of you now, is to try to put yourself in the predator’s shoes,” she said. “Come up with as many reasons why an animal might choose to hunt as you can: beyond being cruel, violent, and unfeeling. We’ll talk about it at tomorrow’s session.”

I focused my eyes on the floor, ignoring Tyler’s inquisitive stare. Did flesh taste so good that it was addictive? It was tough to think of a single other allure to predation, other than biological impulse.

Even with humans, I assumed they had those aspects within them due to their brutal hunting methods. The difference was that I believed they had another side, and that there were enough positive attributes to outweigh the repugnant ones. Besides, they found a way to sate their cravings without harming other creatures.

Maybe that’s something I should ask Marcel. He might know the answers Sara is looking for.

I breathed a weary sigh. “I don’t know if I can do that, but I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, we’re going to start your mission. The goal of this exercise is to stop any hostile ships from reaching orbital range of Earth. I’ll be here for guidance as needed.”

The screens glowed to life, and Tyler clenched his fist around the firing trigger. The image of Earth in the background was hyperrealistic, down to the orange glow dotting the continents. Swirling clouds idled across the oceans, and the inky backdrop framed the planet in serene radiance. It was a breathtaking sight, even in a simulation.

I searched for enemy contacts on sensor data. Craning my neck, I tried to get a visual on a fast-approaching vessel from our left. The blinders were inhibiting my sight line, so it was difficult to ground myself. At least it rendered me impervious to the virtual explosions and conflict taking place in the distance.

My breath hitched in my throat, as a plasma beam sailed meters from our hull. This felt too real and dangerous. The stress of

decision-making was enough to make panic seep in. I was frozen as usual; what was I supposed to do? I couldn't even remember how to engage the targeting systems.

Nonetheless, inaction was unacceptable. My trembling paw slammed the steering column and veered the ship toward the hostile. My diminished vision blurred; my heart was pounding so hard that it felt like an earthquake in my chest. Every instinct declared that facing an aggressive foe was too perilous.

I feel like I'm going to die. Like I'm flying into my doom…and it's not even real.

Meanwhile, Tyler was impossibly collected, as he aligned kinetic munitions with the target. How could humans push through the chemical fog with such ease? It was as though their instincts compelled them to run headlong toward danger, rather than gallop to safety.

"Slanek, deep breaths. Count to five as you inhale, then count to five as you exhale," Sara's voice growled.

I took a few wheezing breaths, attempting to comply with her orders. Through the lightheadedness, I could see the opposing craft enlarging in the viewport. A horrified gasp escaped before I could contain it; this was all happening so quickly. There was no time to think.

Everything on screen froze, including the hostile that was just magnified. I slumped my shoulders in shame; the humans were going to can the experiment on day one. I was a hopeless cause. Helping them was never going to be within my capability, no matter how much I wanted it to be.

"Talk to me!" The scientist's voice sounded urgent over the headset, which jolted me out of my daze. "Rate your fear on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst you've ever felt."

I blinked in confusion. "Um…7?"

"We can work with that. Everything is going to be fine. This feeling will pass," Sara said. "What thoughts went through your mind, as you started to feel afraid?"

"I just… I know I can't do this. I'm not a fighter, and I never will be. My instincts can't handle stress or danger."

“What I’m hearing is that you don’t feel that you can control your emotions. You’ve decided it’s not possible already.”

“Humans are special. I have to face what I am.”

“What you are is a good pilot. Remember, the enemy is just as vulnerable as you.”

“It d-doesn’t feel that way. Never does.”

“Focus on your target and get the shot off. Everything else doesn’t matter; you can complete that one thing. One step at a time.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I allowed my breathing to fall back into a calm rhythm. It was within my power to press a few buttons, wasn’t it? There had to be a way to override my instincts, the way the humans kept their aggression in check. Marcel had squared off against nine Arxur vessels in an inferior ship, and we survived. This was nothing.

“Hey, we can do this, Slanek. You’re not alone here. Remember that!” Tyler growled.

I flicked my ears in appreciation. The sandy-haired human didn’t have much heart after learning Earth’s insurmountable odds, but he was still trying to be supportive. Bravery felt a little less difficult, knowing that fearless predators had my back. Humans were survivors, and that meant I was in good company.

You’re not doing this by yourself. You’re on the predators’ side; not the Krakotl. They’re the ones who should be afraid.

I believed in humanity’s strength, even if I was uncertain of my own. Newfound determination swelled in my veins as the simulation resumed. The blinders were there for the purpose of directing my attention to a single task. It was a matter of just acting, and not thinking at all.

The opposing ship barreled toward us, racing closer to Earth. My aviation knowledge kicked in, and I verified the target on sensors. All I contemplated was the intake of my breathing, while my claw jammed down on the missile switch. Projectiles homed in on the sleek bomber, tracking its evasion attempts.

My human partner sent a flurry of kinetics close behind. It was prudent to take advantage of any disruption to shields. The missiles rocked the imaginary opponent, and Tyler’s well-timed rounds tore

through its armor. The seamless teamwork was invigorating, for a moment. The predator bared his teeth at the thrill, and I almost mimicked him.

Instead of allowing the follow-up options to overwhelm me, I asked myself what humans would do. They would go for the kill, and not give the enemy any recovery time. Persistence hunting taught them how to be relentless; maybe I could learn from that cruelty as well.

“Leave my friends alone!” I hissed to the screen. It was easy to channel my outrage at the unprovoked assault on Earth. “Nobody hurts my herd, ever again.”

I navigated the ship nearer to our nemesis. My anger at injustice was warring with the voice that told me to turn back. The resolute snarl on Tyler’s face was enough to keep my paw on the accelerator. Just this once, I wanted to be the predator; to pounce on a weakened enemy.

My heart was racing, while I unloaded a devastating salvo into their flanks. Orange tendrils burst from its metallic shell, and damned the fictitious crew to the vacuum. The simulation faded back to white, with a ‘mission success’ declaration.

“You did it!!” Tyler cheered, forcing a grin. “That was all you, Slanek.”

I leapt up from the pilot’s seat, wagging my tail. As the Federation often reminded us, Venlil weren’t supposed to have a fighting bone in our bodies. How had I managed to kill an enemy…and emulate Terran intensity? Had the humans changed me?

An answer to Sara’s earlier question popped into my mind. An animal might choose to be a predator, because it refined their species into something stronger. Hunting mandated discipline, and lessened the brunt of fearful instincts. Maybe it was empowering to be the one dealing the damage.

Sara cleared her throat. “I told you that you were a good pilot. That exercise should give you hope for what we can accomplish.”

“But it was only one ship, guys,” I pointed out. “That’s nothing compared to the Krakotl invasion.”

“We’re going to increase the duration and number of enemies every day. You’ll be taking on an army in no time.”

The exhilaration of success fizzled out, as I processed that daunting prospect. The scientist sounded hellbent on pushing me well past my instincts' limit, when all was said and done. Every day was going to be more of a struggle than the next. If nothing else though, her questioning had forced me to consider my fears in a new light.

"Oh buddy, I'm so proud of you." Marcel must have snagged the microphone. His rumbling voice fluttered into my ears. "You're going to turn those birds to space feathers. They'll never see it coming."

"Thanks, uh, but…I don't know about that."

He chuckled. "You're stronger than you think you are. The attacking skills are there, as we all saw. You nailed that fucker, even with Tyler button mashing and getting in your way."

This time, the tall copilot leaned close enough to hear the headset chatter. He threw up his hands in exasperation, then turned his glare at me for giggling. There was hilarity in the expression that once would've had me on the floor, begging not to be eaten. I knew humans well enough to recognize the difference between jest and malice.

Tyler waved a fist at the camera. "Slanek and I are gonna win this war, while you're still on your ass eating Doritos."

"Nah, are you kidding, bro? I'll be up there, stopping you from snacking on too many crayons mid-battle."

"What can I say? That's a true predator's diet."

I appreciated that my friends were able to make light of a dark situation; that was their method of coping with the unpleasant. There wasn't a more resilient species in the galaxy. With their example to model, maybe it was possible to mold me into something a little more vicious.

The survival of these alien predators was what was important, I reminded myself. My progression was a secondary objective that would complement Terran aims. If Earth was to be lost, the spiteful defenders would take as many enemies with them as possible. No battle waged against humans was ever as easy as it looked on paper.

Regardless, I had faith the Venlil Republic wouldn't hang our allies out to dry.

Chapter 43

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 8, 2136

The Federation fleet entered warp in harmonious accord, and our voyage to Earth commenced on schedule. I was less-than-thrilled with the extraneous additions to my crew; Krakotl officers were preferred to the reserved exports of another species. Our diplomats stressed that this was an interplanetary effort, and forced my talons.

While I understood the necessity of building group cohesion, the Farsul they implanted as operational first officer was already asking questions. His name was Thyon; to my understanding, he was a personal favorite of their high elder. That didn't buy him any favor on my vessel. The Krakotl Alliance was the entity that planned this mission, down to the gritty details.

My crew was chosen because of their special attributes, and I trust them. You never know who can keep their head in battle until you've been there.

Thyon scrunched his droopy ears. "Why are Terran colonies not on the bombing agenda? The data dump suggested humans had settlements on the red world and their moon. There's research outposts in the gas giant moons, asteroid mining operations, orbital telescopes and—"

"I get it. But Earth is the priority," I replied. "Other than military installations, the rest can be cleaned up afterwards."

The Farsul wiped the mucus from his nose. "The plans for a follow-up operation should be drawn up now. We have to stay prepared!"

"What is there to prepare for? The predators can't muster a semblance of our numbers." I puffed my feathers out in a display of intimidation. "You know Thyon, I much prefer Jala as my XO. She doesn't nitpick everything."

"You keep strange company, Kalsim. There's something wrong with Jala. She seems…off."

There was a comment that had some basis to it, though I wasn't ready to take an outsider into my confidence. Jala was diagnosed

with a rare cognitive disorder that entailed not producing the neurotransmitters for fear or affection. This caused a deficiency in empathy; her responses to situations were often tasteless.

Most Alliance officers wouldn't have allowed such individuals in their crew. However, the benefit of a person that didn't panic or lose focus couldn't be understated. As long as she didn't have to deal with the interpersonal side of things, Jala was the finest officer in my crew. I credited her as the reason we were the most effective ship in the Alliance armada.

"That is *Captain* Kalsim to you," I spat. "Jala follows orders and makes the right calls. She's still my second even now, as far as I'm concerned."

"Captain, I see we've gotten off on the wrong paw." Thyon's slender tail curled across the floor, twitching with restlessness. "I'd rather be on a Farsul vessel too, but this is where we are. Can we try to make the most of it?"

I tossed my beak. "Fine. But did you have to start tearing everything apart, the second you came aboard?"

"I like to know who and what I'm working with. Every captain has a different background, and a different way of running things. The more I know about you, the more useful I can be."

"Then I'll keep it short and sweet. I started off as an extermination officer. I'm still one really, just with a starship and a title."

Thyon's whiskers twitched, as my former profession registered in his mind. There wasn't a better vocation to prepare a person for eliminating predators. It taught how to destroy a monster's habitat and prevent any chances of survival. Sapient extermination wasn't that different, except that there was more land to torch with the breadth of a planet.

There was a buzzing sound at the door, and I peeked at the security feed. The other Federation implant on my crew was the new medical officer, though the peculiar aspect was the species. The doctor was a Takkan veteran. The Takkan Coalition had been outed as one of the parties amenable to a full alliance with humanity.

For some reason, this Takkan individual had thrown himself onto a transport and begged to join our raid. The newly-demoted Jala escorted him to my quarters, per my request. It was a mystery why

a medical practitioner would want to fly toward a predator's homeworld. My own doctor deserted, when she learned the fleet's destination.

It could be a simple case of this Takkan despising his government's rhetoric. Still, I want to look him in the eye and demand his reasons.

"Come in," I growled to the intercom. "Thyon, you can stay if you want."

The Farsul thumped his tail. "Yes, sir."

"I can't believe he's stolen my post," Jala snapped. "We'll settle this later, soft ears."

I glowered at the female Krakotl. "Don't mind her. Please, come in, Doctor."

The Takkan male strode through the door, and plopped himself in a chair without waiting for permission. His tough hide was silver, about the same hue as my ship's metallic walls. Those tri-toed paws wiggled enough to grasp objects, though I found his kind much clumsier than Krakotl surgeons. Few species compared to how well our talons could sink into or wrap around things.

I jabbed a talon at the doctor. "What is your name?"

"Zarn, sir."

"Alright. Tell me, what is a Takkan doing, volunteering for a mission like this?" I squawked.

"When I landed on Aafa to share that the Gojid cradle was annihilated, I discovered that my species betrayed the Federation in my absence. It was horrifying…shameful. Captain, I want to put an end to this alliance, permanently."

I nodded my beak, and contemplated his words. If we returned from deployment to find the Alliance cozying up to predators, it might push me to renounce my citizenship as well. Then again, a doctor shouldn't have devoted his entire life to extermination. Why would Zarn feel compelled to take such drastic measures?

"Wait, if I may, you were stationed in Gojid space?" Thyon interjected.

Zarn swished his tail. "Yes. I was working under Captain Sovlin. We were the first vessel to encounter a human."

My eyes snapped toward him. “I heard. Everyone heard! What you lot did was cruel and disgraceful. I don’t know that I want you on this ship.”

“I beg your pardon, Captain? It was a human, not an actual sapient. That abominable…freak deserved to rot for eternity. All predators do.”

The captive Terran pilot in their custody could no longer pose any threat, yet Sovlin and his lackeys granted it the slowest death possible. Extermination teams were swift and surgical, when our services were needed; suffering was never our goal. Listening to a helpless creature scream and knowing it was in unimaginable pain…that didn’t make anyone safer. The line that separated us from the Arxur was one that could not be crossed.

“Humans are true sapients, Doctor, make no mistake.” My feathers were ruffled as I offered the reproachful assessment. “I even believe they feel selective empathy. They’re pack predators, after all.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that,” Thyon muttered.

“Why? Because I used to be an extermination officer?”

Zarn blinked in surprise. The doctor gave the appearance that he was about to contest my statements, but my field expertise was enough to make him reconsider. I understood predators better than most citizens of the Federation; humans weren’t as simple as they would like to believe.

“Captain Kalsim has a certain respect for humans. He thinks they’re interesting, as do I,” Jala chuckled.

The physician’s amber eyes bulged. “Interesting? Respect? They kill for sustenance!”

I puffed out my feathers for emphasis. “If you don’t respect a predator, you’re already dead. They’re not to be trifled with. Remarkably cunning.”

The Farsul officer tilted his head. “Your tone is almost reverent. Wouldn’t someone with your…skillset hate predators?”

“Thyon, you shouldn’t hate humans. They can’t help that they’re a disease, that they infect everything they touch. Bacteria don’t choose to be bacteria, and predators don’t choose to be predators. They just are.”

“So what are you saying? It sounds like you don’t believe in this mission,” Zarn snarled.

“Sure I do, but it shouldn’t be about hatred. I don’t derive any pleasure from killing billions; only a predator should. You should feel sorry for the humans, and be grateful that we were not born in such an accursed form.”

The doctor recoiled, and I could see indignation brewing in his eyes. The company this Captain Sovlin kept seemed like an extension of his own undisciplined behavior. It must have been difficult for Zarn to witness the cradle’s destruction, but his current behavior was unhinged. I wouldn’t want this Takkan cutting me open, if my life was in the balance.

“You pity a creature that is incapable of pity. It’s ironic,” Jala remarked, a sharp glint in her eyes.

Thyon’s nostrils flared. “Hey, I’m not following either, Captain. Why do you support wiping humanity out, if you feel sorry for predators?”

Few understood how terrible it was, to pour gasoline on a youngling as it cried for its mother’s milk. The first time I found a nest of predator pups, the guilt of killing them nearly caused me to quit. They were tiny, innocent and untainted by their parents’ atrocities. I broke down on the ride home, and asked my mentor how we could kill a baby for the way it was born.

There was cold logic in her explanation. Little predators become big predators, and reproduce exponentially. Within a few cycles, there would be a full-blown infestation; it wouldn’t be one set of pups we were killing.

“What happens if we don’t wipe them out? Humans will spread everywhere, and they’ll be in our systems in no time,” I answered. “This is our only chance to destroy them. We kill because we must.”

It was an unfortunate reality that Earth had to be eradicated. Unlike our incensed Ambassador Jerulim, I understood why most in the Federation couldn’t bring themselves to push the button. They were relieved not to have to wrestle with the moral conundrum, of killing a species that had yet to lash out. They didn’t want to spend the rest of their lives wondering if some predators could’ve been saved.

It was the same reason the Federation readily accepted that

humanity destroyed itself with nuclear bombs, two hundred years ago. That was how this problem got so out of wing in the first place. The predators attained spacefaring capabilities without anyone realizing. Only a few months into their expeditions, humans had already caused the destruction of the Gojid cradle.

The longer we let Earth survive, the more Federation worlds will perish.

"We agree on this being our moral imperative, but that's all we agree on." Zarn leapt up from his seat, and swished his tail with impatience. "I'm here because I want to witness humanity's death with my own eyes. I'm qualified—overqualified, even, and I know the enemy. Now, do you want my services or not?"

Jala snickered at the Takkan's temperament. "I like this one, Captain."

"Well, I do not, but it's not like I have a suitable replacement," I muttered. "You'll follow my orders on this ship, Zarn. It's not becoming of a doctor to have such little value for life."

"I don't need a lecture over how I feel toward predators. I value lives; our lives. Jala, show me to the medbay, now," Zarn hissed.

The female Krakotl glanced at me for confirmation, and I curled my wing tip in a 'Go on' gesture. Something told me I needed to keep a close eye on the doctor. The kind of person that delighted in death and suffering would never have intentions that I could trust. Besides, it was a bad omen when the crewmate who took a shine to Zarn was a sociopath.

"That was an unpleasant discussion. What do you think, Thyon?" I asked.

The Farsul hesitated. "I think I have your back, sir."

"That's not what I'm asking. If you're going to be my XO, then I expect you to speak freely behind closed doors."

"Frankly, I've seen what happens after predators hit a world as well. There's nothing to feel remorse over. I'll sleep better when this mission is done."

"Understood. Let's head to the bridge, and keep watch for any Terran ambushes."

My heart felt heavy as we set off together, and I wondered where my crew fell along the moral spectrum. Thyon missed the

distinction between his feelings and Zarn's, though perhaps he would realize in time. Unlike the doctor, the first officer was motivated by reasons that had nothing to do with the humans. His concern was the suffering he witnessed and any future threats, rather than pure vitriol.

That was the correct rationale for the destruction of Earth. This fleet would succeed in its duties, because there was no other option for our survival.

Chapter 44

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 9, 2136

As soon as we departed Krakotl space, it became evident that the humans had been tracking our movements. The predators were lurking in the shadows along our starry route; two ambushes were sprung on the fleet during the first day of travel. The primates knew that we were coming, and that was enough to unsettle the crew.

But the humans were afraid, from what I could tell. Their attacks seem devoted to stalling, and chipping away at our resources. Larger Terran ships had FTL-disruptors on their hulls, which could be deployed as soon as we came within range. They would dart in for a missile run while we were dazed, then vanish just as quickly.

Why do they flee after a single strike? These techniques seem too cowardly to be borne of predators.

Nonetheless, I adjusted personnel rotations, so that our vessel was combat-ready at all times. I allowed myself only a short nap after the second ambush, just to refresh my wits. There was no time for a full night's rest until the enemy resurfaced.

Thyon was working overtime as well, compiling data to predict the Terrans' next appearance. Our vessel was going to nail the humans, next time they tried anything. If their attempts at disrupting our operations were this lousy, they must lack confidence in their combat abilities.

"This locale seems like the likeliest spot for an ambush. The EM radiation from the system's pulsar makes our sensors and targeting wonky," the first officer said. "Though, perhaps I'm mistaken. It would affect their targeting too."

My feathers ruffled with disquiet. "I suspect humans' reliance on targeting is less than ours. They have a backup system in their brains."

"Should we advise the fleet to reroute? If I'm correct on Terran whereabouts, there's less than a minute before they activate the disruptors."

“Let’s not do anything hasty, Thyon. Their ships can outpace us, so we’ll just be pushing this off to a later date. We face these predator pests here, on our terms.”

The Farsul officer swallowed nervously, and studied his readout. I couldn’t blame the big-eared guy for feeling discomfort about engaging the humans blind. Our instinctual fear wasn’t conducive to off-the-cuff maneuvers, and precise calculations under stress. Krakotl could muster aggression, sure, but that desperation wasn’t controlled.

But Jala wasn’t bogged down by chemicals. If I placed her behind the weapons station, she could recalibrate our artillery on a dime. We didn’t have to worry about fear addling her senses. There was a reason I twisted the brass’ wing, not to lock her up in an asylum like they wanted to. It was in our best interest to use people like her against the predators.

I cleared my throat. “Jala, assume control of weapons. Switch to manual override, and hit the first ship you see with whatever you like.”

The female Krakotl shoved a younger officer out of her way, and pecked the buttons with giddiness. She didn’t need to be told twice. It was rare to see anyone else so thrilled to carry out orders, especially when those involved being flung into combat. My second-in-command wouldn’t miss the clues, if they were shoved in his face.

“Captain, answer me honestly,” Thyon whispered. “Does Jala have Predator Disease?”

I lowered my voice. “That terminology is ignorant; predators do feel fear. Jala is an asset that I have under control. She knows I’m the only thing stopping her from being thrown in a deep, dark hole.”

“I don’t believe for a second that predators feel anything…but she has more in common with them, either way. How can you trust her not to side with *them?*”

“Even people with her condition don’t side with people who want to eat them. I’ve heard that has a way of shortening your lifespan.”

“You don’t say.”

The Farsul transferred the projected enemy coordinates onto the sensor grid. By his estimates, the humans were camped within a gas

giant's ring. It seemed a suitable position to lie in wait. The planet's gravitational field added further disturbance to sensor readings, and the icy ring particles were indistinguishable from a quiet vessel.

That's actually some solid analytics from Thyon. I suppose I'm fortunate the guy the Federation saddled me with is halfway intelligent.

The first officer also noted the maximum range of an FTL disruptor. It stood to reason that the humans would wait until the bulk of the fleet was within the pulse's umbrella. I highlighted the blast zone circumference on my screen, using their approximate location. Now, it was a matter of forging ahead and waiting.

"Navigations, as soon as we hit the edge of that red circle, disengage warp," I squawked. "If we time this right, the humans will think we're stunned. Just as they show themselves, we'll be ready to fire."

Thyon blinked in surprise. "Bold plan. If we're off by a few seconds, we'll get dazed alongside everyone else."

"And if we drop in too early, the humans will know we're onto them. Of course, we don't know they're here for sure. We could be chasing ghosts…but I'm trusting your work."

"Thank you, sir. Shouldn't we tip off the fleet though?"

"Negative. The predators may have breached our comms."

Other friendly vessels may have come to similar conclusions, but our role as the Krakotl flagship was to seize the initiative. Defeating a predator necessitated brashness. I don't think even the meticulous humans accounted for us turning the tables. They were under the impression that everyone in the Federation was weak, and that might serve us well.

The fear plastered across the bridge crew's faces was apparent; the inexperienced enlistees weren't keen on hurling a multi-billion credit ship into a predator's trap. To be fair, this was the kind of action that earned reprimands from Alliance Command if it backfired. We had one chance to validate our decisions.

My file does say I take 'unnecessary risks', and attributes my success to luck. I imagine Thyon read that dossier before boarding.

For better or for worse, I always asked myself what a predator would do. Trying to predict their moves or understand their

thinking was easy, once it was a habit. This raid was one final job, before passing the baton to someone younger. What better way to cap off my career than by vanquishing the greatest threat of our time?

I fluttered over to the navigations station, ready to intervene if the technician froze. Our dot was almost overlapping the perilous area. Thyon was itching to issue the disengage order, but I didn't want to jump the gun. We couldn't allow the riskiness to inhibit our patience.

My breathing hitched as we entered the pulse threshold. "A little further…real space, now!"

A head-on view of a gas giant materialized on the viewport. The dull orange mass, surrounded by a glistening ring, was a sight to behold. My talons stiffened, as the feeling of being watched sank in. I couldn't see any enemy ships, but I could sense their unholy presence.

"No sign of human activity—" Thyon began.

Thousands of friendly vessels appeared around us without warning. The Federation fleet was evidently reeling from the effects of the disruptor signal. Lithe Terran ships swarmed out of the ring, and descended on the nearest Krakotl vessels with fury.

Jala's wings extended to their full span, as she began firing missiles at will. Several projectiles slammed into an enemy bomber, and it was terminated mid-swoop. More explosives followed close behind, synced with whirring kinetics that pelted their shields.

The humans were pushed back by my crazed Krakotl, long enough for some friendlies to catch their bearings. Our allies' aim was clearly rattled without sensors, and most plasma beams missed their mark by a long shot. Nonetheless, the predators determined the mission was a wash. They weren't going to take the chance of a stray hit connecting.

There's only a few dozen ships in this ambush, anyways. The Terran military didn't lend sufficient support.

"They're retreating. Don't let them get away!" the Farsul first officer exclaimed.

"All Federation ships, fire at will." I barked over the comms channel. "I don't care if you miss! Hurl everything you've got ready

at their position."

Jala was happy to oblige those orders, and dispensed another round of missiles toward the gas giant's cover. That was where the Terrans were trying to vanish for emergency warp. None of our explosives connected with an opponent, but they did pack a punch to the ring itself. Ice fragments were flung out from the epicenter, and some shrapnel found its way into human armor.

The navigations officer maneuvered us to the edge of the ring; the proximity was close enough to get a visual. A few predator craft were rendered inoperable, or ripped apart by debris. Cheers erupted across the bridge, as they saw the devastation we unleashed. I tried to mimic pleasure, but gunning humans down just made me feel numb.

My eyes lingered on the wreckage in the viewport. "Nice work, Jala. We must've taken out a number in the double digits…in no small part, due to your fortitude."

"Don't mention it. That was fun!" she trilled. "Just a shame our skirmish was so short. I was expecting more of a scrap."

Thyon narrowed his eyes. "It's not a shame that our victory was decisive. It makes it more likely that our flight to Earth will continue unimpeded."

I tuned out their bickering. My focus was on scanning a motionless Terran vessel via manual input. Ship sensors had been fully automated since before I was born. At close-range though, it should be possible to work through the interference with operator assistance.

The human craft I scrutinized had its hull caved in, which suggested debris impact at high velocity. It was mostly intact, but life support and propulsions were knocked offline. Some part of me itched to know if its pilot was still alive. Future generations would ask about these Earthlings, and nobody could provide an adequate explanation. This was a pristine opportunity to document a sapient predator's mannerisms.

"Silence on the bridge! Comms, make sure all transmissions are being recorded," I screeched. "I want everyone here to know the enemy, so I'm hailing that venting wreck. Consider it a crash course on predators."

Thyon gasped. “What? What makes you think that demon will answer?”

I tilted my head. There was no guarantee a human would accept our communication attempt, but it was worth a try. While seeing its face would make the crew shudder, there was no feasible risk. Its weapons and escape options were severed, and it was smart enough to know that.

The outbound hail was sent with a swipe of my talons, against the protests of the crew. A tense silence filled the air, as our signal was extended to the crippled foe. There was no response for several seconds, which only added to the crew’s nerves. Did these people think a predator could teleport on deck through a call?

I could almost sense the Terran’s bewilderment; it was weighing whether to hear our message. Curiosity must have won out, because a pair of frosty blue eyes appeared on screen. The ferocity of its gaze sent several crewmates ducking for cover; their color looked cold and unnatural. The beast had a laceration across its forehead, and was dabbing it with a towel to keep the blood out of its vision.

It’s wounded. Maybe it’s not thinking straight, so we can pry some intel from it.

I couldn’t say that looking at it didn’t give me the creeps, even after decades of dealing with predators. This creature was more intelligent than anything I eliminated in the wild. There were only a few clumps of hair across its face, which made it look alien and bare.

“What do you want? I don’t need your mockery, birds,” it gurgled.

I resisted the urge to avert my gaze, and instead tried to make neutral observations. Beneath that petrifying visage, there were signs that the creature was rattled. The slightest furrow of its brow suggested fear, and the way its jaw tightened indicated pain. It realized its death was imminent; that knowledge overshadowed its last moments.

I raised a wing in a noncommittal gesture. “Nobody is mocking you. I just want to talk.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” It leaned closer to the camera, close enough to make out the veins in its eyes. “What makes you think I want to talk to you?! Enlighten me.”

“A hunch. I figured a pack predator wouldn’t want to die alone. If I’m wrong on that, you can end this transmission now.”

Thyon was staring at me like I’d grown a third wing, while Jala was observing the exchange with amusement. I had my reasons for fielding this call in the public eye. The crew needed to see affirmation of my theories, after the skeptical reception I observed. It would be a critical lapse in understanding, to presume they shared the Arxur’s solitary behavioral patterns.

The human bared its teeth, and shook its head in disbelief. It placed its chin on its hands, then refocused those horrific eyes on the camera. Frost spiraled from its plump lips, which suggested the cabin temperature was frigid. With only a stringy flaxen mane, I didn’t imagine it would last without environmental regulation for long.

“You never answered my question,” the beast sighed. “What is it you want?”

“I want to rescue you from that icebox. Surrender yourself to our custody, peacefully, and I’ll see that you survive. You can ensure that your culture is remembered.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. How fucking stupid do you think I am? Death is better than what you lot do to human prisoners.”

“You have my word that I’ll hold you in fair conditions. You don’t want to die. I can see your fear.”

The predator blinked slowly, and hugged its arms together to conserve warmth. It wasn’t ready to give up key information now, but if I managed its needs, it might start spilling intelligence. Self-preservation was a driving force in every sapient being.

The human detached a small cutout from its dashboard, and turned it toward the camera. The image was of three snarling, young predators, with the pilot crouched beside them. Another adult primate had an arm around the offspring, and was flashing pearly white fangs. They looked vicious, but…happy.

“That’s my family. I am afraid, but not of my death,” it growled. “I’m afraid that you’re going to kill everyone I love. The only thing that will please you is my whole species purged from existence… and I don’t know if even that will quench your hatred. Please, stop this.”

The transmission cut out abruptly, and I pushed down the lump of pity in my throat. There was the confirmation that humans cared for each other. I hoped that inspired a bit more sympathy from my comrades; the Krakotl government shouldn't hide humanity's redeeming attributes. It was enough to establish them as a major, valid threat.

The truth matters, I thought to myself. *We're not going to strip that away on my ship, to make ourselves feel better.*

"The predator only has a few hours before its atmosphere is used up. Orders, sir?" Jala asked in an emotionless voice.

I lowered my gaze. "Terminate it. A *quick death*, Jala. The human refused my offer, and we can't leave it to be rescued by its brethren."

The female Krakotl rolled her eyes, but deployed a missile into the drive column. I watched as the wreckage went up in flame. It was merciful to grant the beast a swift end, rather than condemning it to suffocate in that freezing tomb. Still, its death didn't bring out any positive emotions. Some of the crew seemed moved by its elimination as well, which meant my strategy was a success.

Thyon's nostrils flared with exasperation. "What were you thinking, Captain?! What would you have done if it accepted your offer?"

"I would've stuck it in the brig, like I said," I answered. "And no, Zarn wouldn't have gotten within a hundred paces of it. We could contain a single, wounded predator…and it was useful."

"Useful? What did you gain from that little chat?!"

"Watch your tone, XO; this is my ship. Now, you all know the enemy as I do. You can come to terms with the real reasons for this mission."

The Farsul first officer gritted his teeth. Thyon was disturbed by my generous view of predators, but he knew protesting on the bridge was out of line. Perhaps he needed to believe falsehoods to maintain his conviction.

All doubts needed to be sorted out before we reached Earth. Assuming the Terran ambushes were resolved, the fleet's next engagement would pummel everything humanity had into oblivion. When we reached our destination, I hoped my crew would be ready to do what was necessary.

Chapter 45

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 9, 2136

This should have been a jubilant moment. The UN liberation fleet established contact with the Venlil military, and requested permission to dock on our homeworld. A victory against the Arxur was something I never fathomed; the humans had accomplished the impossible.

But I didn't understand why the Secretary-General had traveled all the way from Earth to meet with me. His stated purpose was to discuss 'something urgent' with me before those ships landed. The way the human diplomats were tight-lipped, and implored me to remain calm, instilled some apprehension.

My advisors were aware of the Krakotl invasion. We offered to take in as many Terran refugees as needed. About fifty thousand predators had arrived on the first flights, and were settled into temporary housing. We didn't have the resources to take care of them long term, or to satisfy their…dietary preferences. But leaving our friends to die wasn't an option, so we'd figure it out together.

There was no need to persuade us to help, and the minutiae could be handled by stand-ins. As for the diplomatic fiasco, the humans sent representatives to every allied species yesterday. They would point the finger at the Kolshian Commonwealth, and pray their innocence was believed. With such immediate casualties, all bets were off.

I'd expect the Thafki to be most suspect of predators, given that they're almost extinct. The Fissans, with their expansive resources, are the ones we truly must convince, at all costs.

There wasn't much to do besides await each race's reaction. I told the humans, in no uncertain terms, that I wouldn't expect any government's assistance. What else could the UN figurehead wish to discuss in person, at such a crucial time in his planet's survival? If Meier was leaving Earth, shouldn't his priority be appealing to Chauson or Tossa for aid?

"Noah, do you know what this is about?" I asked.

The Terran ambassador frowned. “I think it’s better to wait for Meier, Tarva. I don’t imagine you’re going to like this. Please, just promise you’ll try to understand…for me.”

The ominous reply didn’t provide any reassurance. That was how humans spoke when they were worried something predatory would frighten us, or shake our trust. I didn’t like seeing my beloved friend pleading with me, like I was bound to turn against him.

“Don’t be like that,” I grumbled. “What, are you finally going to tell me you hunt through your endurance?”

Noah gaped at me, eyes bulging. “Who told you?”

“I figured it out, watching you exercise back on Aafa. It occurred to me how that…tirelessness might help chase down prey. You don’t have much else going for you.”

“Gee, thanks. You don’t seem very concerned, though.”

“Why should I be? Your people would never hunt mine, either way. I am humanity’s friend, and I’m not here to judge your ancestors.”

The ambassador patted my shoulder with affection. I didn’t appreciate that there was still secrecy around their hunting methods, but trust was a slow process. Fortunately, my deduction skills were sufficient.

“You are the only real friend we’ve had out here. Thank you,” Noah whispered.

I flicked my ears in acknowledgment. “Not to inflate my own ego, but I’m pretty alright. So see, Secretary-General Meier doesn’t need to waste time ‘talking me off the ledge.’”

“That’s not what I’m talking you down about,” a gravelly voice interrupted.

Noah and I both startled. Neither of us noticed the Secretary-General enter the cavernous reception hall. I had no idea how long Meier had been eavesdropping, but it was enough to catch the subject matter. I was glad I didn’t make any suggestive quips about their endurance.

The UN leader looked like he hadn’t slept in days, as he tossed a hard-copy photograph on my desk. The poor guy collapsed into the nearest chair, and pawed at his bleary eyes. I wanted to order him to get some rest, but with Earth in danger, I doubted he would

comply.

My gaze landed on the image, which showed a uniformed human sitting across from an Arxur. Was this taken from one of their ships? The gray had a shackle around its leg, so at least it was restrained from rampaging through the crew quarters. How the Terrans got it there in one piece was another question.

“We captured several Arxur from a cattle ship.” Secretary-General Meier stifled a yawn, and blinked in quick succession. “Quite a few of our major players had, well, concerns about sharing the next part with you. Given that you’re the only reason humanity is still alive, I felt you had the right to know.”

“T-to know what?” I asked, hesitantly.

Meier raised his hands in a placating gesture. “Please don’t take offense; I’m just repeating the story multiple grays told us. They claim the Federation infected thousands with a microbe that made them allergic to meat, then killed their livestock to force them into herbivory.”

I narrowed my eyes, processing what the human relayed. Our Terran friends proved that being a predator alone didn’t explain the Arxur’s cruelty. Either sadism was a trait unique to their species, or a reaction to a particular event. On that note, the Federation had no issue sacrificing lives or bending morals, in the short time I knew the primates.

I’ve watched them beat and starve a human. Blow up spaceships to eliminate any offer of friendship. Plan multiple raids to wipe out all life on Earth.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t put that antagonism past the Federation. But if it’s true, I know nothing about it,” I replied. “Regardless, why would the Arxur choose to farm sapient beings, rather than eat plants?”

Noah pursed his lips, suppressing a sigh. “They’re obligate carnivores, Tarva. They cannot survive without meat.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “I…I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Why not?”

“Obligate carnivores can’t digest plants like you or me. They don’t have the right gut bacteria, and they can’t synthesize vitamins from plant forms.”

“There are certain nutrients, like taurine, that exist almost exclusively in meat,” Meier chimed in. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Noah, but I think such carnivores have high protein requirements as well.”

The astronaut nodded. “Exactly. The glucose in their blood… y’know, energy, comes from proteins rather than carbohydrates. In the absence of protein, their bodies start eating their own muscle and organs.”

I shuddered at the notion. Having your innards digested by your own cells was the literal definition of starvation. Human scientists needed to spread these facts around; it would make predation more sympathetic. Flesh-eating made sense if biology left no alternative.

Noah couldn’t eat any meat while he was at the Federation summit. No wonder he was irritable; I had no idea he was in such agony.

Burgeoning concerns flooded my mind, and I stared at the ambassador in horror. We were informed from the onset that humans had higher protein requirements. Had the vegetarian visitors been suffering or starving to pacify us? I hoped none of them would have long-term repercussions; that was never my intention.

Noah’s brown eyes softened. “What’s wrong, Governor? Was that too graphic?”

“You have been starving from eating plants?” I squeaked.

Meier breathed a frustrated sigh. “Humans are omnivores, Tarva, as we have told you many times. The nutrients in vegetables are quite accessible to us.”

“That said, without animal products, we usually develop serious mineral deficiencies,” Noah interjected, sensing my next question. “Vegetarians need supplements or fortified foods: B12, iron, protein, and so on. This has been explained to your medical community.”

Undoubtedly, it was easier to absorb those nutrients through dietary means. At least the Terrans could survive on vegetation, with a little help. The Arxur couldn’t derive any nutritional value from plants, even if they wanted to. I didn’t know why zero scientists, here or in the Federation, had figured that out.

“So it’s not about bloodlust at all. I get the point, I think,” I sighed. “What do you want to do about the grays’ story?”

Meier grimaced. “Governor, I’ll give it to you straight. The Arxur offered us an alliance, and the Federation has forced us to hear them out. We need all the help we can get; especially from such a powerful player.”

I stared at the floor, and avoided Ambassador Noah’s pitying gaze. This was the scenario every Venlil dreaded, from the moment humans declared their peaceful intent. Everyone feared they would buddy with the Arxur at the first opportunity. We hoped that these predators wouldn’t be like the ones who saw us as tasty playthings.

But the truth was, Terrans were nothing like the monsters we imagined. They sided with the Federation, and mustered a genuine attempt at peace. General Jones told me a long time ago that humanity would do anything to protect Earth. I couldn’t blame them for making that decision: forsaking our predicament for theirs.

I blinked away tears. “Do what you have to. I understand why you’re leaving us. Their friendship is more…impactful…”

“Leaving?” Meier echoed.

“Wait, do you think we’re just going to let them eat you?” Noah stepped toward me, shaking his head for emphasis. “We’d never abandon you! Never, understand?”

The Terran ambassador enveloped me in a warm hug, without waiting for a response. I sank into his suffocating grasp. Losing the humans would be a devastating emotional blow; especially this particular human. I didn’t think I could bear it. The selfish part of me wanted them to stand against the Arxur, whatever the cost.

The Secretary-General cleared his throat pointedly. “We consider you the same as our own people. Any deal with us mandates the release of all captive Venlil, and an armistice between your governments. That is non-negotiable.”

“W-what? You want us to ally with…or bargain with the grays?!” I hissed.

“Something like that.”

“Elias, I *killed* my only child because of their bombing excursions. I remember how it felt, t-to hold her in my arms as I told the doctors to disconnect life support. Forgive me if I’m not thrilled about the idea.”

The humans were considering a deal out of necessity, but the circumstances were different for our predator friends. Terrans hadn't been slaughtered en masse for centuries; that wasn't something you just forgot. Whatever the Federation had done, it didn't change the unspeakable atrocities committed against Venlilkind.

You can't reason with creatures who bomb schools, and laugh at brutalized pups. I don't want to talk to the grays.

I recognized that personal experience was clouding my judgment, but I didn't want to brush it aside. The Arxur ripped apart my life. Even my mate and I separated, because he reminded me too much of our daughter. The pain was still a constant ache in my heart. Suffice to say, I despised the Arxur with the utmost venom.

"I am sorry for your loss, Tarva. I know how hollow those words must sound." The wrinkles on Meier's face were taut with sympathy. "But please let me correct that statement: you did not kill her. You chose not to prolong her suffering, because you're a selfless, kind person."

My tail drooped with grief. "T-thank you. Is that what you really think?"

"I do. That's why I think you'll help us broker this deal. So nobody else on your world will have to endure that feeling, ever again. And so that we might not have to bury our loved ones, seven days from now."

The UN leader was a gifted speaker; I'd give him that. Was any price too high to bring peace to my planet? Even a brief reprieve would merciful, if it halted the torment of millions. All the Venlil really wanted was for this senseless war to stop.

"Noah, how can we…no, how can you trust them?" I asked, after a long silence.

"I don't, but there's no good alternatives." The ambassador crossed his sinewy arms. "I'm disgusted by those fascist child-eaters, but the Federation is the immediate threat to Earth."

Meier frowned. "We're ideologically incompatible with the Arxur, long-term. An alliance would be temporary, to buy time. Perhaps we can steer them down less reprehensible paths."

I supposed the reptilians would be less of a menace under Terran

control, pointed at our enemies. Still, how could we justify this to the non-hostile Federation majority? The largest voting bloc were the 107 that sought an anti-Arxur alliance with humanity. Those species would see a predatory partnership as violating the crux of their position.

“Are you guys trying to ensure I lose next year’s election?” I grumbled. “I’ll stand with you, but this won’t look good. You might as well go on galactic television, and pledge to eat a Zurulian infant a day.”

Noah flashed his teeth. “Well, the birds already think that’s our morning breakfast. We’re past worrying about appearances.”

“Very well. Though, I hope you have a better plan than flying to a cattle world and offering me as a sacrifice.”

Meier smirked. “Actually, an Arxur captain gave us the location of one of their spy outposts. I’m going to fly within comms range, and strike up a nice conversation. Care to join me, Tarva?”

The thought of seeking a carnivore’s safe haven made my heart stop in my chest. There was nothing I would care for less, than to be surrounded by abominations. The mental image, of hungry eyes darting over my vital areas, made me want to curl into a ball. What Venlil would ever want to talk those foul beasts?

A low whine rattled off my vocal cords. “I can’t think of a worse idea, but I’m right behind you. Let’s get going.”

Chapter 46

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 10, 2136

Alarms blared from the cockpit, and my fur stood on end. Meier's head snapped up from its snoozing position; the human needed only a fraction of a second to process the stimuli. The Secretary-General jumped into full-alert mode, scrambling toward the ship's helm. It was incredible how quickly the predator brain kicked into fighting mode.

Our transport was accompanied by a ten-ship UN escort, which was armed to the teeth. We planned on skirting the edge of FTL comms range, and blasting a long-range transmission toward the Arxur station's coordinates. There shouldn't be a high chance of conflict, since we were keeping a substantial distance. Still, the humans came prepared to protect their leader.

"Status?" Meier asked, his voice icy calm. "What's all this about?"

The Terran pilot grimaced. "Massive formation on an intercept course, about two milliparsecs out. Looks like patrollers of an Arxur make."

"Hail them on all frequencies."

"Already done. No reply, sir, but our sensors picked up an attempted target-lock."

"Abort mission. Adjust our course at once."

"Too late. We can't shift our heading quick enough in hyperspace."

Shit, I don't belong anywhere near a conflict, I panicked. *Why didn't the humans assume this station location was a trap? I guess desperation overrode their paranoia.*

It seemed the reptilians weren't as keen on talking as the captive ones posited. The fake promise of an alliance was exactly the sort of deception the Federation claimed was inherent. If the Arxur managed to subdue us, I might have to take drastic measures. I hoped I didn't pass out at the first sign of boarding; my head felt woozy, like I had been twirling around for hours.

Meier's eyes widened, and he caught me as I lurched forward. It was all I could do to coax the slightest motions out of my muscles, as the terror of becoming Arxur livestock intensified. The UN leader pushed me back into my seat, and strapped me into the harness with steady hands.

"P-please…Elias, I c-c-can't…please kill me if they get on board," I pleaded.

The Secretary-General combed a hand through his gray hair. "Nobody is going to die. We'll figure a way out."

"No, p-promise to kill me if that time comes." My words tumbled out in hyperventilating gasps, and I caressed my searing heart. "You have no idea what they'll do to me, especially when they figure out who I am. Please."

"I understand what you're saying. Everything is going to be fine, but I need you here with—"

A colossal jolt radiated through the ship's frame. Meier doubled over, clutching his temples; profanity spewed from the human's mouth. That was quite the deviation from his typical composure. It felt wrong to see such a stalwart man roll onto his side, and curl up into a fetal position. His cheeks had turned bright red, and his binocular eyes watered.

Is Meier okay? He looks like he is asphyxiating. I've never seen a human's skin that color.

The effects of the FTL-disruptor pulse hit me a millisecond later. I felt my ears pop like I was in a plummeting elevator, and the discomfort only escalated. I whimpered in pain, as I sensed the fluid sloshing in the auditory canals. The positive was it snapped me out of my fear, but the existing dizziness was compounded. My surroundings were an undulating haze.

"Fucking hell," the Secretary-General grunted. "Shields. SHIELDS!"

The Terran leader shifted onto his stomach, and began to crawl toward the cockpit. He tapped his earlobe, still bothered by the ringing sensation. He then shook his head, as vigorously as a rain-drenched Venlil. I didn't think any human had been on the receiving end of a disruptor pulse before; this crew was the first to experience it.

Our ship's pilot raised an unsteady arm. The disorienting effects

inhibited his coordination, and he couldn't jab his finger on the right button. There was no concerned chatter from our escorts; their bearings must be rattled too. The grays had rendered us defenseless.

Silver streaks closed in on us from a diagonal heading. Orange light encompassed an escort vessel's hull, as the Arxur swooped in. The reptiles seemed to be taunting us by drawing so close. More blinding beams accelerated around us, and drilled into the UN craft from flawless angles. This was a beatdown, not a fight.

I struggled through my own panting. "Elias, get a firearm and shoot me. Please, I beg you."

A disgruntled Meier struggled to his hindlegs. His hair and attire were more disheveled than I ever recalled. The dignitary was painstaking with his grooming and persona. His reddened skin glistened with water, and dark stains spread under his arms. Human sweat had a way of making them look slimy and feral.

"Hail the Arxur again, but with a video preview. Do it!" the Secretary-General barked.

The helmsman stiffened. "Are you mad, sir? That's going to be a little difficult now."

Our pilot slammed a fist on the control column, swerving away from a flock of mini-missiles. I'd guess those were designed to squeeze between chinks of armor, or dodge interceptors. Our ship listed to one side, as several hits battered our underbelly. The navigator howled some curses.

Meier shook the other man's shoulder. "OPEN A CHANNEL. Do exactly what the fuck I said!"

"Yes, sir."

The Secretary-General placed his hands on the console, steadying himself as kinetics pelted our armor. Our allies were trying to intervene, but several were otherwise occupied. Meier gritted his teeth, and turned his eyes right toward the camera lens.

An Arxur ship banked around us, and pivoted to a head-on view of the cockpit. Its railguns glowed, as it prepared to finish us off. My bloodstream was flooded with nauseating chemicals; these were the last moments of consciousness I would ever have.

To my bewilderment, the enemy craft hesitated. Its weapons

powered down, and it lost interest in our staring contest. The other grays also backed off, leaving their Terran targets time to recuperate. They circled back to their jump point, and watched us from the increased distance.

“Greetings on behalf of the Arxur Dominion.” The throaty voice on the speakers was accompanied by a visual of a menacing creature. The sight of its yellowed fangs was revolting. “Our sincere apologies, brothers. We do not mean you any harm.”

Meier heaved a flustered sigh. “Why did you attack us? We hailed you as soon as we saw you.”

“Your subspace trail originated from Venlil Prime, so we didn’t realize it was you,” the predator croaked. “You were heading straight for a key foothold of ours. Listening to the prey beg is a waste of time. I’m sure you understand.”

It didn’t escape my notice how the Secretary-General’s shoulders tensed. He inhaled a few purposeful breaths, as though trying to restrain his temper. I was aghast at the civility the Arxur was displaying to the humans. Nothing directed at us ever suggested this demeanor was within their capacity.

Even as they are polite to the Terrans, they are bashing Venlil. They would never agree to a truce with us.

“We *were* heading for your listening station,” Meier growled. “Humanity wishes to negotiate terms for our species’ interactions… and we have some intelligence to offer.”

Its eyes narrowed to slits, inspecting the primate’s form. “Speak. I am listening. Identify yourself.”

“I’m Secretary-General Elias Meier, leader of the United Nations. Do you have the authority to negotiate on behalf of your species?”

“Authority over this sector. I’m Chief Hunter Isif. This transmission is being recorded, so I will relay anything you say through the proper channels.”

My difficulty in collecting my thoughts was frustrating, but this was marked improvement from being fired upon. It was unsurprising to learn Arxur labeled their highest-ranking officers as chief hunters. Their society revolved around the systematic slaughter of other sapients. Did the humans really think they could change that?

This was a foolish mistake on my part. The Venlil had no part in any of this, even if we were loyal to the Terrans.

“That will suffice,” the Secretary-General decided. “Humanity thought you would be interested to learn seven species that have relocated their military assets. In other words, their territory is practically unguarded.”

Isif’s tongue flittered between its fangs, as it salivated at the prospect of a raid. The sinister gleam in those eyes was enough to make me question humanity’s plan. How could my friends call such a malicious assault on the Krakotl’s head? Meier knew precisely what would happen to the civilians on world; it was a low move, even with the stakes.

“Also, there are 17 other species who have mobilized a couple ship units,” the human leader continued, without any sign of guilt. “Perhaps that will weaken a few key regions, or result in their forces being spread thin. The first seven names will be easiest, but it’s your choice.”

The Arxur offered a scratchy chuckle. “Send the data over, Meier. I take it these assets have…relocated to attack you? You wouldn’t give information for free if it wasn’t in your interest.”

“It doesn’t matter. But I do have a request in return.”

“If you want to ally with us, you need only ask.”

The human leader paused. He turned around to face the cabin, and waved for me to join him. I shook my head in the negative, not wanting the predator to see my presence. The entire dialogue was going to crumble, the second my face appeared on screen.

Meier crossed his arms, tapping his foot with impatience. The stubborn human was going to wait until I joined him, one way or another. Blood roared in my ears, as my shaking claws unclipped the harness. My legs felt like they were made of jelly; I slunk up beside the primate with my tail between my legs.

The Secretary-General’s eyes glowed with defiance. He scooped me up by the chest, and propped my paws around his neck. The reptile’s maw hung agape for several seconds; the dilation of its eyes made my grip tighten. I imagined it was contemplating how I’d look on a carving station.

“Why is that feeble animal not cowering?” Isif asked, at last. “You

have your food loose in your ship?!"

My ears pinned against my head. "F-fuck you, scaly wretch. I hope you rot in a furnace."

The Arxur leaned back, and placed a spindly arm beneath its snout. I was surprised it didn't return the insult, or lobby vulgar threats at my race. The way it flashed its teeth reminded me of the Terrans' amused expression. Then again, perhaps it was the display of appetite that we used to interpret that as.

Meier sighed. "Tarva, meet Isif. Isif, meet Tarva. Excellent, now everyone is acquainted."

"Its name is irrelevant. It is lesser. Explain yourself, quickly, human," the Chief Hunter snarled.

"Sure, that's easy. If you want positive relations with the UN, cease all hostilities with the Venlil Republic." The human bared his teeth in a confident smile. "Also, release every Venlil in your custody. We will compensate you double the cattle's weight in fresh meat, so food is not an issue."

"I…you have some nerve! Why would we relinquish our right to such a delicacy? Why would this be the entire basis of your terms?"

"The Venlil are our partners. You recognize the value of sowing division within the Federation, and having sources with access to their information. You also know what a powerful ally we could be. Sparing one species isn't that important in the grand scheme of things."

Isif cast a ferocious glare at me, but I managed to meet its gaze. The Arxur could not harm me through the screen. This could be my only chance to confront a monster, and I wanted it to know that Venlil were not just inferior creatures. My courage seemed to cement its decision.

A growl rumbled in the soulless predator's throat. "We heard you took Arxur captives during our unfortunate clash in Gojid space. Add them to your end, and we have an agreement…unless you killed them. In that case, there won't be any deals today."

"I accept those terms. For the record, we don't kill surrendering prisoners. It's not strategical," Meier replied.

"We're glad to hear that. How do you wish to complete this

transaction?"

"Bring the captives, alive, to the abandoned Venlil colony I just sent you. We'll give you the code to a storage satellite, once you've left the prisoners unharmed. The exchange will be arranged a month from now."

"That is acceptable."

I blinked in amazement, unable to believe my ears. Had the Arxur hunter agreed to release all of our livestock, that easily? My instincts suggested that it had to be deception. For all of Meier's poised words, I couldn't fathom the benefit to the enemy.

The logistics of reintegrating millions of traumatized Venlil, and trying to explain that our greatest allies were warlike predators, daunted me too. That was on top of the projected millions of Terran refugees we needed to find a place for. Perhaps the grays agreed to release the cattle, because they realized the burden it would place on our infrastructure.

The humans' judgment will be sound. You can discuss this with their generals later, if they have the time.

The Secretary-General scowled at the camera. "You try anything on the Venlil, we blow the satellite up. Also…we have a rough estimate of how many cattle you have, so don't try to cheat us."

Isif snorted. "Cheat you? I am extending my claw in friendship. But your request will take considerable effort, and it's inevitable that some mewling Venlil will slip through the cracks."

"I understand," Meier muttered. "Thanks for your time, Chief Hunter. I hope our information serves you well."

"Yes, the 'misplaced assets' have been…passed along. Why do you not just ask for our help stopping their attack?"

"Because I have no guarantee you wouldn't just destroy your competitor."

"Ha, destroy you? If we wanted that, you would already be dead."

Something about the Arxur's tone sent a chill down my spine. That didn't sound like an empty threat; the reptile was certain that it could fulfill that goal if it desired. A predator's bluster wasn't usually so nonchalant and dismissive.

Meier raised his eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

“We squeezed *Earth’s* location out of some cattle. The scholarly types. Learned a lot about your species…your violence,” Isif chuckled. “Don’t misunderstand, I’m not saying this to threaten you. But that should prove we won’t attack.”

“I…I see.” The human’s complexion reverted to its ashen state, and concern flashed in his pupils. “Why are you so interested in befriending us?”

“You’re the most exciting thing to happen to this galaxy in a long time. We searched for other true sapients for centuries. It’s a shame the prey found you before us.”

The Secretary-General stared at the screen, unable to formulate a response. The excitement at finding fellow predators clearly wasn’t mutual. The last thing the humans needed was another genocidal enemy scoping out Earth. That made it much tougher for this partnership to be a temporary stopgap.

“Don’t look so glum. I’m told the Federation tried to kill humanity in its nest; we are the same. That clingy rodent is more likely to harm you than us!” Isif declared.

My eyes narrowed. “I have never lifted a claw against humans, *predator*. You don’t know me.”

The Arxur curled its lip. “Oh, but I do, *dinner*. You Federation hypocrites are all the same. Have a safe ride home, humans. I’ll see you around.”

The video call ended, and Meier helped me climb down from his back. The Secretary-General looked shaken to his core. That final revelation wormed into his skull, and escalated his concerns for his home. I hoped I hadn’t aggravated the situation, but the way the reptilian spoke to me was maddening.

That conversation hadn’t inspired any optimism for Earth’s future; at least, not in my book. It was dubious whether the gray would fulfill its stated bargain as well. Whatever the humans desired from that engagement, I hoped they got it.

Chapter 47

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 16, 2136

When deprived of sleep for days, the crew began to get a little jumpy. The Terran ambushes became more sporadic along the journey, but persisted all the same. The Krakotl fleet was left with no choice but to stay on constant alert. I focused on keeping the other officers rested, while I shouldered the brunt of the shifts. My personnel became run-down despite the adjustment.

It was severe enough that I ordered Zarn to give essential crew members stimulants. The drugs left me wired enough that my wing wouldn't stop twitching, which was a nuisance. But with our arrival slated for today, the soldiers couldn't afford to be drowsy. Sharp wits were a necessity to clash with humans; perhaps that was the purpose of the ambushes all along.

Yet another disruptor pulse had shaken us up on the outskirts of the Sol System. The jarring effects were becoming routine, as we all tried to clear the fog from our minds. My eyes felt like a Mazic was sitting on them, but I forced them to stay open. The predators wouldn't break us on my watch, not on the cusp of our destination.

My gaze shifted to the viewport. "XO, status report."

"I'm detecting sensor anomalies. The humans may be somewhere nearby, but it's tough to tell." Thyon proved a godsend with his analytical mind. His skillset complimented my tactical understanding. "We're already in the system's outer orbit. This is their last chance to strike."

The sensor readout revealed that we were less than a milliparsec from Earth. We anticipated the bulk of the Terran armada was waiting within Sol's inner reaches. I had no doubt the humans set up FTL interference throughout their system, so there would be no further hyperspace hops. The rest of the journey could be handled sublight.

Our instruments picked up millions of planetesimals, which were mainly composed of ice. The circumstellar disc was a sprawling collection, which Federation scientists had noted as one of two

debris planes. Our fleet filtered out all water-dominant objects, so they wouldn't drown out enemy movement.

Where are the humans? If this is the border of their territory, you think they'd send someone to greet us.

"Is there anything to be concerned about with this location? Any weapons hidden in the belt?" I squawked.

The first officer cleared his throat. "The objects are spread too far apart to pose a threat, sir…as visual indicates. I detect no mining activity or research stations."

"There has to be something unusual," I pressed. "Humans don't just pick their spots at random."

"All I notice is that they just powered down the FTL disruptors. Perhaps their primitive defenses are malfunctioning? We could shave a few hours from our travel time, if we can get in one more jump."

Suspicion filtered through my tired brain, and I urged myself to consider the circumstances. It seemed unlikely that all of humanity's defenses would collapse at the same time. The only reason they would halt the signal would be to allow their own ships through. But there were no unknown drive signatures on sensors. We should see any predators coming with ease.

As if to mock my certainty, a massive chunk of ice blinked into existence amidst Krakotl ranks. It plowed into the heart of our formation, dwarfing the ships it steamrolled over. Panicked chatter barked over the radio, and our Federation allies scrambled to expend an orbital bomb on the object. We managed to crack the first planetesimal, but dozens more surfaced on several headings.

My talons undid the sensors' filter, and hundreds of warp blips emerged on my screen. The predators predicted that we would filter out anything icy, which rendered their strike invisible to our instruments. I could appreciate the deviousness of their ploy; human creativity was leaps and bounds beyond the Arxur.

I leaned over the comms panel. "ALL FEDERATION VESSELS, deploy your FTL disruptors now!"

The subspace indicators vanished, as enough of our allies complied with my order. Still, dozens of hijacked planetoids, twenty times the diameter of our craft, were enough to cause a headache. We needed

to take evasive maneuvers if any were on trajectory for our position.

Jala puffed out her chest with excitement. “And so it begins. I want to be the one to push the button when we burn their cities!”

There was no time to worry about her derangement. It didn’t matter if she was the one dropping the payload, or if I handled it myself. As the one giving the orders, the burden of responsibility fell on me. I knew what a terrible deed we were about to commit; the mental images gnawed at my conscience.

At least the creatures from past exterminations had no foreknowledge of their demise. I wondered how many humans’ last thoughts would be of their families. Those unsightly hunters had more in common with us than most Krakotl would like to admit. Their desperation to survive and their collectivism resonated with our own.

It is truly a shame that predators are prone to destruction and violence. There is only room for one of us in the galaxy, I reminded myself. *This crew is sacrificing something of ourselves, so that the Federation has a chance to survive.*

Nonetheless, I respected how the hominids utilized every asset at their disposal. Dozens of Krakotl warships lie crushed or totaled around us; the Terrans never had to rear their ugly heads. One icy object was barreling toward our location, despite the pitiful attempts to obliterate it. The asteroid’s magnitude left no doubts that our hull would implode, if it connected.

“The damn inbreds strapped a warp drive to a space rock. Who the fuck does that? Or even *thinks* to do that?!” Thyon spat.

I hummed in thought. “Someone who sees anything as a potential weapon. A predator much more dangerous than the Arxur.”

The Farsul gritted his teeth. “Glad you’ve seen the light, Captain.”

“I’ve always ‘seen the light.’ Now quit with your snide remarks, and find us a way out of this mess!”

Thyon jerked his floppy ears in disdain, before issuing new orders to navigations. The asteroid was propelled forward by its existing momentum. It was near enough that I could glimpse the imperfections on its surface. Distant sunlight glinted off the watery composite, and washed it in a serene, ultraviolet hue. That color

would look a lot less beautiful smashed up against our plating.

Our vessel executed a sharp turn, and rerouted power to acceleration. The state-of-the-art warship didn't seem to cover the space fast enough; it felt like a predator was nipping at our talons. My stomach somersaulted, as the projectile scraped by nearly atop us. We cleared the collision course with mere seconds to spare.

The humans might've hoped to incite panic, so that they could cow us through our instincts. We had to remember that the stakes were our entire civilization; our right to roam the galaxy in freedom and dignity. Quelling my nerves, I contemplated which weaponry could take the icy mass out. Careful placement of explosives should still conserve firepower for the main event.

Movement flashed in the viewport's corner, a streaking blur of metal. My weary brain took a full second to process the new data. An allied vessel was gunning straight toward us; a head-on collision wasn't something either of us would survive. But the fools were preoccupied dodging their own asteroid, and seemed oblivious to our presence.

"Move the blasted ship!" I screeched. "Can you not see we're going to crash?!"

The navigations officer curled his neck with trepidation, as he frantically brought our nose upward. There was a brief scraping sound, from the friendly brushing our underbelly. The artificial gravity failed to compensate for another abrupt change. A forceful tug sucked us toward the rear of the bridge, and I lost my balance on my perch.

My wings fluttered frantically. There wasn't enough time to gain proper lift, but I wanted to slow my fall. The air beneath my cyan feathers allowed me to drift, and I glided down the slanted gravity well. Other Krakotl also used shared instincts to cushion their fall.

Thyon wasn't as fortunate; flight didn't exactly grace his tubby form. The Farsul's stout paws offered little traction, and his curved hindlegs made his bipedal stance… precarious in the best circumstances. His jowls quivered with fear as he tumbled backward. There was a sickening crack from his head slamming against the support wall.

"Thyon! XO, you will answer when I speak to you! Give me some

sign that you're alright," I hollered.

The first officer didn't respond. He was crumpled in a limp heap, with a concerning amount of blood pooling around him. What if the poor guy was dead? Regardless of his attitude, the last thing I wanted was to send him home in a body bag.

Jala clicked her beak together in delight, and I shot her a warning look. She was elated that my second was knocked out of commission, since it cleared the return of her old post. It was bothersome that a person could derive pleasure from another's misfortune, but I suppose it was no different than Zarn relishing human suffering. Soldiers like them could perform their duties without remorse, at least.

Focus on the battle, I chided myself. *You cannot get distracted and let the humans surprise you again. Honor Thyon's wishes.*

The gravity adjustment kicked in at last, and my crew members scrambled back to their posts. The navigations officer rushed to level our heading. We were fortunate to escape with our frame intact, and only a few dozen allies taken out. The most imaginative strategist wouldn't have accounted for asteroids warping out of nowhere.

I glided over to the downed first officer, containing any untoward displays of grief. His russet fur was matted with blood, and he was unresponsive to poking. My talons locked around his hind ankle, digging into the pulse point. Relief coursed through my veins, as I felt a faint heartbeat.

"Doctor Zarn!" I sent a transmission to the medical bay, praying that the spiteful Takkan had any healing aptitude. "My security team is transporting the first officer to your lab. Serious head trauma, internal bleeding."

"Understood. I'll attend to the necessary preparations, Captain," Zarn replied.

The security personnel carted the unconscious Farsul away, and I suppressed my concern. With neural trauma, the officer might be looking at permanent damage even if he was stabilized. There was no telling what timeframe to expect for Thyon's recovery, but I doubted he'd be back within the mission's span. It hadn't been within my forecast to lose anyone this early in the mission.

My attention reluctantly returned to the battlefield, where the Federation fleet was trying to regroup. Dormant Terran ships crept out from behind planetoids, and descended on any stragglers who strayed too far from the group. The chaos of the asteroids had broken our tight formation. Numbers were our primary advantage; we would be fine as long as we stuck together.

They cannot stop all of us, or even a majority.

Jala ordered a sizable contingent of our fleet to charge at the Terran raiders, to deter them from pressing their luck. I blinked in irritation, as she claimed that the command was authorized by me. Lying was not a quality I appreciated, especially when it was done to get her way quickly. Then again, perhaps it was better to let her make the time-sensitive decisions.

“Burn any humans that try to run! We have to kill every one of them!” Jala shrieked.

The atmosphere was solemn, as her phraseology was a bit too honest. She projected a certain vindictiveness that needed to be tempered down. This mission couldn’t be about inflicting suffering, or killing for killing’s sake. That was not why I wanted my crew to think we were doing this.

I tucked my wings behind my back. “Don’t let a single predator go, if you can stop it. The more humans that escape, the greater the chance they retain a viable population.”

“Why is that such a bad thing, sir?” an engineering assistant asked.

“There’s two futures, son: the one where we survive, and the one where they do. When cancer metastasizes, it infects and consumes all healthy tissue nearby,” I answered. “Is that what you want for the galaxy? Consider this an early detection…before it spreads to our heart.”

A group of Terran fighters were blazing away, after punching at our weakest links. To my relief, my crew locked onto a pair of targets and chased them with plasma. Krakotl warships converged on the cluster like locusts; they sent those “fearless hunters” running off like Venlil.

The humans were surprisingly slippery, finding an escape route with minimal casualties. Their ships evaded with vaulting maneuvers, and a plethora of defensive countermeasures were built

into their hardware. For all my knowledge of predators, I hadn't expected these ones to be so adept at fleeing. This was a positive sign, if they had so little courage.

My eyes landed on the faint blue dot on the horizon, which the predatory opportunists were retreating toward. Humanity was poised to make their last stand; the poor saps would perish without any reason to be missed. We were close enough to Earth to detect thousands of ship contacts, fanned out as a protective ward. A smarter species would've used those vessels to flee, if they knew of our arrival.

That territorial nature does have its downsides. They'd rather fight and die, just like we predicted.

The first wave of Terran defenses were beaten, and I suspected that was the toughest stage of transit. That asteroid trick would only work once. We had a clean shot to the predator's home. Now, that small fleet was all that stood between us and orbital supremacy.

We were so close to eliminating the menace that was humanity.

Chapter 48

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 17, 2136

Renewed energy surged through my veins, as the fleet coasted within striking distance of the human armada. This was the most important skirmish of our lives. The Terran forces were a ragtag bunch, consisting of a primary cluster of recycled Venlil vessels, a few of their own slow behemoths, and a handful that looked too small to host a proper crew. Our homogenous warships had the advantage of both conformity and technology.

Scans of Earth offered some interesting insights, as we registered several million life signatures in underground structures. I conferred on this data with the fleet, and we agreed to nail those havens first. Human bunkers were not designed to withstand direct antimatter blasts. Once their key hideouts were demolished, major population centers were the second priority.

“Orion advance, ready your plasma guns on the Terran formation,” I chirped into the comms. “Follow this five seconds later with a generous donation of missiles. Everyone will fire on my mark.”

The radio crackled to life with a reply. “How certain are we that we can defeat these predators?”

“It’s a simple math equation. We all act together, and we have more guns than they have ships.”

The Terrans held their position, as we coordinated our target locks. Jala aimed our railgun at a gargantuan warship, which already registered five others pinpointing it. Overkill wasn’t the worst idea, to ensure that the largest enemies didn’t survive. My sensors warned that our fleet was being target-locked in return, and a spurt of munitions were seconds from impact.

“FIRE!” I screeched.

The lights show around me was a marvelous sight, with energy beams zipping between us and the humans. I watched as our target was sundered by various incisions, capping off the largest threat before it began. Other predator craft fell to the sheer onslaught;

their numbers couldn't hold a candle to ours.

We sustained some damage to our frontlines, though many vessels that were hit by the enemy were able to press on. The ships we selected to lead the way were Farsul armor-heavy vessels, by design. They didn't pack as much in terms of weaponry, but they could absorb more force than the standard craft. In other words, those craft shielded the rest of us.

The surviving human vessels were either nursing grave wounds, or had pulled off lucky evasive maneuvers. I estimated we'd taken out 40% of our opponents with the first strike; the other fronts must be enjoying similar success. The Krakotl fleet wasn't showing any mercy, and showered missiles at the predators. The hominids left a trail of interceptors behind them, desperately trying to muster some fight.

This is almost unfair, ganging up on such a primitive species. No wonder they wouldn't engage directly; maybe it was as much pragmatism as cowardice.

The enemy pilots seemed to realize they were falling back toward Earth's atmosphere. They had no choice but to turn and fight, or surrender orbital supremacy. Our allies were encouraged by their concession; we charged forward with righteous determination. I could feel my own crew's qualms about battling predators dissipating.

I tossed my beak for emphasis. "Don't let your guard down. Predators will try anything if they're desperate enough."

"Sir, the smaller craft are shooting kinetics and plasma at us, while charging at max speed. Thing is, I'm not detecting any life signs," Jala chittered. "Have the humans found a way to hide from our sensors? They might be concealing some bunkers."

Confusion rippled through my plumage. "I doubt even humans made advances against technology they barely understand. The pilots could have just ejected, and left the vacant ship on a collision course."

"You didn't listen to what I said. The craft are still firing on us, and making course corrections. There has to be a pilot!" she protested.

My talons tightened around my perch. Those Terran ships didn't seem to be steering on a pre-set course. Before my eyes, one of them

whirled out of the way of a plasma beam; it performed a total thrust reversal on a dime. I didn't know how anyone could calculate that fast, or how the lapse in gravity wouldn't cause a pilot to pass out. Hell, the g-force should crush an organic's skull.

While predators in movies were nigh unkillable, that was not reality. Those maneuvers were impossible. The only conclusion was that those spacecraft were flying themselves, and killing based off some sort of algorithm. How could a computer ever learn strategy… and even if it could, who would risk implementing that function into its programming?

I leaned over the comms. "The smaller craft are fighting without human input. I believe they're ordered to crash into us at max velocity. FOCUS ON THEM!"

Hundreds of railguns pivoted toward the threat, and a slew of missiles greeted the pilotless-craft as well. If our readings were correct, these robots seemed reliant on nuclear power. The plasma jets they unleashed at close range were tied to those systems. The humans had skipped right to inflicting the most damage possible. A single hit burned through even the Farsul ships' hardened exterior.

It's actually quite clever, to not have to worry about losing pilots. They don't have to fuss over containing reactions from weapons, or expending power on life support.

The Terran automatons were decimated when we managed to connect, but they reacted quickly to our threats. We had to focus multiple warships on a single one, to make sure it couldn't calculate us to death. Several reached their targets, and rammed nose-first into the armored front line. Our hardiest ships took significant losses; the humans were determined to take them out of the equation.

Jala singled out aggressive predator vessels, and provided suppressive fire for our allies. We advanced deeper into their territory, knowing human fervor would render them reckless. Their crater-pocked moon passed alongside us, a landmark of our goal. Defense satellites minced us with lasers and gunfire, but they were idle targets to be taken out.

The predators were retreating in gradual increments, and their scattered formation was on the brink of collapse. These stalling attempts, inventive or not, were futile. In a few thousand

kilometers, we could commence the orbital bombardment.

“Sir, the humans are broadcasting a message fleetwide. Should I discard it?” the comms officer asked.

I sighed. “Let their last words be heard. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Federation fleet, we advise you to turn back now. We took the liberty of informing the Arxur of your departure.” The audio transmission had no video, but the booming voice was jarring even without a visual. “If you return now, you might arrive in time to save your planets. You’ll need the artillery you’re going to expend on Earth. We will accept your surrender and allow you to return unimpeded.”

A stunned silence swept across the bridge. Every crew member was undoubtedly recalling their home, and the people we left behind. Nishtal was our birth planet, a marshy paradise with floating cities and breathtaking algae blooms. It didn’t surprise me that the humans would guarantee it fell alongside Earth; that was predatory spite.

But the thought of returning to Nishtal, to see every stilt-tower and ceremonial nest obliterated, cracked a small piece of me. That wasn’t even considering how the Arxur would ravage our population. What egoistic predator didn’t take *prizes* of its hunts, after all?

Friendly radio chatter cropped up again. “The Arxur are coming for us? I’m sorry for listening to one of those fiends, but we have to save our homes!”

“She’s right,” another captain agreed. “Shouldn’t we at least send a part of the fleet back? We never should have left Nishtal unguarded.”

“Take heart, my friends. The humans are bluffing; we have them scared shitless.” I didn’t believe the primates were fibbing, but this mission had to be finished. Whatever the cost. “Do you think it’s possible to talk to the Arxur? The predators want to manipulate our empathy, and use it against us.”

The last part was true, though I found it improbable they’d stake that wager on a falsehood. The Terrans hoped they could wield our compassion for our brethren against us. They probably understood how we felt, seeing our homes vulnerable and under siege.

This was a cost I could barely find the strength or the logic to commit to. Odds were, a few hours wouldn't make a difference on this scale. Our fleet would be disorganized, and short of ammo, whether we accomplished the objective or not. The question was whether any other species could survive through our sacrifice.

"But what if they are telling the truth?" came the retort across Federation channels.

I lowered my eyes. "Then we'll be out of here in a few hours. If the Terrans survive, they will just join forces with the Arxur. Humans are untenably violent, and they'll want revenge. There is no choice but to eradicate Earth."

The fleet rallied behind my words, finding their conviction restored. There was nothing to stop the humans from following our subspace trail, and unleashing their retribution on our cities. It was far too late now to walk back any attack; predators didn't forgive or relinquish grudges.

The first bomber group barreled toward the line of Terran ships, who were behaving strangely. I watched as they backed away, and left massive gaps in their formation. Why were they giving our vessels a path to break through? Either they were extraordinarily cocky in anticipating our 'surrender', or this was a trap.

Thousands of missiles slammed into our spacecraft seconds later, hailing from the direction of their moon. The explosives demolished any ships they touched; I was stunned to see radiation amidst the readings. These items could only take out one ship without shockwaves, but the missile contacts numbered half of our vessels. The fact that the predators stocked that many nukes on Luna…

Why do the humans have such an oversized supply of city-killers? What reason could they have to point them at their own world from above?!

"Deploy all missile countermeasures!" I shrieked into the comms. "Destroy every structure on their moon. I'm sure that has to be the last of it, but…"

Just as the Federation fleet began compensating for the nuclear deluge, the humans deployed another staggering missile wave. This salvo was also in the thousands, begging the question of just how large their atomic cache was. No wonder our scientists thought the apes irradiated their world; it wasn't for lack of trying!

Jala spotted a military complex near us, and dropped an antimatter bomb onto the lunar coordinates. As much as I hated to waste extermination supplies, I didn't question the necessity of stopping the nuclear assault. Every bomber who forged ahead was getting buried in radioactive warheads; there were only so many explosives we could shrug off at once.

The Terran defenders camped by the orbital threshold, hurling plasma at anything that moved. Thousands of our ships had succumbed to the mindboggling missile count; we were still trying to swat the remnants away. With our numbers whittled down, the humans smelled blood. Our attack force suddenly seemed a bit more manageable.

I flapped my wings in irritation. "We have to find a way through the wall, and quickly. Any suggestions, Jala?"

"Well sir, there is a small gap by the northern polar cap. The predators are overextended," my sociopathic second replied.

I blinked. "Good thinking. That is where we can break through, and pick our mark."

My mind wandered as I relayed assignments. The first item was delegating our quickest ships to rush through the enemy opening. Our entire lead bombing unit was atomized, so the swift cruisers were the obvious replacements. I figured the humans would try to stop any advance. The second our people started moving, we needed to block the predators from sealing the gap.

Earth looked depressingly beautiful, as I studied the viewport. White clouds formed a veil over tan landmasses, which were divided by rich oceans. I was relieved that this skirmish was almost over. Savages or not, it was impossible not to feel sorry for the humans. There was exquisiteness and wonder in what they had built.

And I knew there were plenty of us left to get the job done.

"It's been an honor serving with each of you. Let's finish this, so we can all go home," I croaked over comms.

Federation cruisers bolted toward a vacant space in the Terran formation, and pushed their engines past recommended limits. Our warship joined the masses surging forward; the walls rattled as we careened into position. The non-essential ships formed a metal

shield between the cruisers and the humans gunning to intercept them.

An angular Terran behemoth sauntered toward us, not even slowing down as we hovered in its path. My nav officer took evasive maneuvers, and ducked their uncontrolled plasma and missiles. The humans weren't taking the time to aim! I could almost hear the predators begging us to stop, and guilt tugged at my heart.

The massive ship launched dozens of smaller craft from its hangar bay, but they were spliced up by our kinetics on arrival. Those scrawny fighters were easy pickings for us. The spacecraft carrier found itself target-locked by a murderous Jala. The female Krakotl showed no emotion as she directed a missile through a hangar, circumventing its armor.

"Yes!" She leapt up with enthusiasm, as the predator ship erupted into pieces. "It's funny, isn't it? We're blocking them from getting to the real target…and these humans are forced to watch."

An appropriate somberness overtook the bridge, as the rest of us processed her words. There was nothing amusing about what we were slated to witness. It was difficult to remember that it was just business.

Fifteen Federation cruisers slipped past the humans, with the timely help of the allied fleet. They crossed the final kilometers to orbital range, and scoped out the exposed planet below. I watched as the predators flung everything they had at the attackers, knowing full well they were out of reach. Time seemed to freeze around us; this was a moment that would reside in my nightmares.

The payloads struck home after a painstaking eternity. Bright flashes dotted Earth's continents, and the anti-matter purification wiped away our first human targets.

Chapter 49

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 17, 2136

The Terran drone monitoring station was set aboard a massive boat, for some reason. I guessed it was because a moving target would be difficult for the Krakotl to nail from orbital range. More than likely, they would need to dive through the atmosphere to take us out. My friends had terrestrial aircraft and defenses waiting for that moment.

The humans judged that I was better equipped for an oversight role, scanning communication channels for anything helpful. Despite his protests, Marcel was still sidelined due to injuries as well. It was a safe assumption that his assignment was more to calm me, or to jump in if I froze. There were dozens of other predators in the control room, each itching to be in the stars.

Instead, we all watched the battle unfold from behind a computer monitor. As the first Federation bombers broke through, everyone realized how quickly our defense was falling apart. There was a seriousness I'd never seen in humans, even in the darkest situations. Why couldn't they have fled Earth, like I told them to?

"Our satellites registered 42 impacts, some on major population centers." General Jones addressed the station's crew in a solemn tone. "I've assigned each of you a local newsfeed to listen in on. We…need to keep track of which cities have been lost."

I watched as the American officer placed a handful of red pins on a map. Her drone program hadn't quite worked out every aspect of space warfare, but its hasty deployment was the only thing keeping us in the game now. Teaching the automated programs to differentiate between hundreds of alien ship classes, space debris, and subspace disruptions was no small feat, I was told.

My red-haired friend opened a news stream on a side monitor, and traced a clawless hand across his facial scars. The image I saw out of my periphery made me want to grab my blinders, but I forced myself to look. It was an aerial view of rubble in all directions; a sprawling metropolis turned into a wasteland by antimatter.

"—of Mexico City and New York City rocked North America. The

Raven Rock Bunker Complex has also been demolished, killing essential US personnel. However, no region has gone unscathed.

Asia has sustained an unequal share of the detonations. Initial reports confirm mass devastation in Karachi, Tokyo, Dhaka, Shanghai, and Mumbai, several highly populous cities. The seat of the Chinese government, Beijing, is yet untouched, though it is expected to be a future target.

On the European front, Switzerland's extensive bunker network has made it the target of multiple bombing deposits. Their entire population, as well as a million refugees from EU neighbors, are packed in various shelters. Meanwhile, the Turkish government denies reports of a hit to Istanbul, despite satellite imagery suggesting its fall.

In the Southern hemisphere, contact has been lost with Sao Paolo, Lima, and Buenos Aires. Africa is reporting impacts to Kinshasa, Lagos, and Cairo, while Oceania mourns the fall of Sydney. Conservative casualty estimates are in the tens of millions, planetwide."

"How can the Federation do this, Slanek? Why do we deserve to die?" Marcel's eyes watered, and his voice was a scratchy whisper. "We're just people, like you…all we wanted was peace!"

I pinned my ears against my head. "I'm truly sorry. I wish we could do more to help."

"These are civilian hubs! There was no reason for any of this to happen…not even their own worlds under fire could make them stop. Millions are dead because of our eyes, because we're so fucking different to you."

Despite the anger in his words, I could see that my friend was on the brink of a breakdown. The UN fleet was being pummeled on all fronts, and every screen depicted ship explosions. My heart clenched as I realized Tyler might already be dead; the tall flesh-eater was signed onto a spacecraft carrier crew. Human artillery was depleted too, despite their unsanctimonious love of nuclear weapons.

My resilient predator can't give up now, can he? It's like Marcel is admitting defeat.

"I know, Marc," I said gently. "Listen, no matter how much this hurts, we have to keep fighting until the last settlement falls. If we're gonna die today, we better take a lot of them with us."

Pure hatred glimmered in his hazel eyes. “Oh, you didn’t have to tell me that. If humanity glues itself back together, I hope we kill every last one of them.”

“You don’t mean that, my friend. Know us Venlil are with you to the end. For whatever that’s worth.”

The Venlil only had a few hundred ships left in reserve, after donating the bulk of our fleet to humanity. Nonetheless, Governor Tarva ordered the majority of our remnants to Earth’s defense. They were intermingled with human units now, playing supporting roles. There were less than fifty warships remaining behind at Venlil Prime. Both sides knew the Republic government sent more than we could spare.

My gaze focused on one Venlil grouping, whose human front line had succumbed to a brazen Krakotl charge. The predators committed themselves a bit too heavily to stopping the first bombers, and still failed in that regard. The Republic ships banded together on instinct, which made them a larger target on sensors.

I was stunned by how little the enemy hesitated to dispatch them. This Federation onslaught seemed just as predatory as the humans, if not more; it was like they didn’t consider Venlil people anymore. We couldn’t just freeze and rely on herd mentality, as our comrades were being murdered.

“Venlil support, you need to stay mobile,” Marcel growled into his headset, clearly noticing the same issue. “Do not let yourself become a sitting target. Call for UN backup; your allies will find a way to help you if we can.”

A few Terran ships overheard the chatter, and ducked their engagements to help the Venlil grouping. The Republic’s plasma aim was noticeably worse than the Federation’s; the prey crews must be panicking. Even with my extra training, I would be terrified in their position. They were parked in the path of certain death.

The Krakotl ships clashed with the battered UN reinforcements, while the Venlil threw in supporting missiles. The humans were flying like crazed maniacs, at least on the manned ships. I think the predators found the energy to protect us, because they realized our opponents would break through otherwise.

We might be the ‘weakest species in the galaxy’, but at least it’s extra

ships to stand in the way. I should be with the other Venlil, fighting…

The humans were churning out explosives and gunfire, and the Venlil kept aiding from a safe distance. The Federation must've realized that those campers were prey-crewed vessels, not predators. Several enemies rerouted their trajectories to cruise through our timid offerings, instead of searching for an opening.

The Terrans swerved to meet the hostiles, and concentrated plasma fire on the largest warships. Heavy Federation classes had the most explosives, so they were the priority. Earth's innocuous shape loomed behind the Venlil defenders. With armed vehicles barreling toward them, the urge to flee must be overwhelming.

I donned my own headset, contemplating what Sara had taught me. "Venlil ships, you are much stronger than you think you are. The Federation is wrong about us; we are not just the galaxy's laughingstock. Push past your limits! Hold the line!"

Several Venlil were retreating before the Krakotl overtook them, but scrambled back into position. None of us wanted humanity's home to suffer further harm. Most had come to love the arboreal predators, and love was as good a motivation as hatred. My people clawed back more than the Krakotl expected, though the aggressors cut the Venlil ships down in droves.

A few Federation craft slipped through on that front, as friendly forces succumbed to the larger assault. My heart sank when I saw nobody was chasing the leader bomber; the other Terran groups were too far away and otherwise occupied. About twenty missiles were fast-tracked to Earth, which I knew meant millions more casualties. That was a statistic too staggering to comprehend.

If the Venlil didn't make a last stand, it would've been a hundred detonations. It's about mitigating the damage at this point…and praying for a miracle.

The Krakotl were clever, enough to allocate a few warships to guard their rear flank. The UN's Gojid liberation fleet had attempted to hit them from behind, but found an armed unit waiting at the ready. Had the circumstances been less dire, I think the humans may have noted how the birds were a worthy foe.

The Terran ship count was ticking down to 1000 on our readout; the early stages of the battle were catastrophic. The Federation still

had several thousand vessels at their disposal, and pressed ahead with unchecked aggression. Our predators were running out of ships and tricks. They could only be so many places in the vastness of space at once.

The enemy bombers trickled through in small groupings, and that meant the death toll continued to rise. I couldn't imagine how Marcel felt; the red-haired human was holding his head in his hands. He slapped my tail away, when I wrapped it around his wrist. Terran civilization, everything he ever knew, was slipping away, in the span of an hour.

I jostled his arm again. "Hey, Marcel, please help me. There's five hundred new contacts from the direction of your colony Mars. I don't know who to notify."

I was aware that I was supposed to alert General Jones, but I thought feeling useful might do my friend some good. The vegetarian needed to snap out of his misery, and turn his thoughts away from Nulia and Lucy. He must be feeling guilt for sending them to a bunker. Honorable predators should go down fighting, not wallowing in self-pity.

"Did you hear me?" I demanded. "There's more ships inbound, of a standard Federation make."

"A second wave of Federation monsters? Wasn't the first one enough?!" he spat.

I couldn't blame him for that reaction. The Terrans had no spare manpower to allocate to a fresh armada. But there had to be some attempt to stop the newcomers, even if it was woefully insufficient.

Seeing that my human wasn't going to be helpful, I flagged down General Jones. She studied the data for a full minute, poring over the details.

The American officer frowned. "It's difficult to lock on the signal, but it appears they're trying to hail us."

"Shall I put it on the main screen?" an attendant asked.

"Yes, patch us through the interference. If the Feds are offering us a surrender, I think we have no choice but to accept it… unconditionally."

The occupants of the monitoring station turned our attention to the

central video feed. General Jones positioned herself in front of a camera, a bitter look in her eyes. It was unclear why the Federation would reverse their stance on total extinction. Wasn't their only demand every human dead?

A quadrupedal animal appeared on screen, and Jones' expression morphed to surprise. Those rounded ears and soft brown fur were Zurulian features. The captain shied away from the camera, clearly having never seen a human before.

"GODS, DON'T EAT US! Please! Uh…I mean…" the Zurulian stammered. "Don't shoot us?"

Jones' lips curved down. "What are you doing here? This is an active warzone."

"Friendly! F-friendly! We'll leave."

The quadruped was struggling to string coherent thoughts together. I jumped out my seat, and wagged my tail at Jones in a 'Go away' gesture. The human general didn't take the hint, so I gave her leg an insistent shove. Understanding flashed in her eyes, and she ducked out of view of the camera.

I flicked my ears reassuringly. "Zurulian officer, please inform us of your intent. Nobody is going to hurt you."

"Chauson…wanted…begged the prime minister to help humans. Unrelenting. He said they were nice, but t-they just look hungry to me! So hungry!"

Hope flickered back into Jones' pupils. "Wait a second. You're here to help us?"

"Why is it growling at me? Venlil, you've got to get out of there!"

I exhaled in frustration, and glanced at Marcel for support. My human's eyes were a million light-years away, red around the rims. His lips never moved, not even a forced snarl. That brokenness gave me the resolution I needed.

"That is just how humans talk, because they have deeper vocal ranges. There's nothing to be afraid of," I said. "We need urgent assistance at several locations. Help would be very much appreciated."

The Zurulian tilted his head. "I know what my orders are, but won't these predators attack anything in sight? They're in aggression

mode! And this is a quarter of our entire fleet. We're no military species."

"Zurulian, we…we've already lost millions of lives. Innocent lives." A rare hint of emotion crept in Jones' voice, though she quickly steadied herself. "I promise we want nothing more than to protect Earth. I will relay word that you're friendlies. Please, if you believe in peace, help us."

The quadruped's gaze darted to the viewport, where his formation was closing in on the Federation attackers. His expression was conflicted; I was worried that he might go against his orders. This captain acted predator-averse, and even showed disgust at the sight of a human. The call was terminated without any clarification.

Terran ship numbers continued to dwindle, while the Zurulians sat and watched. General Jones sighed, and highlighted the new vessels as alien friendlies. That was a necessary gamble. The Federation had yet to notice the newcomers' approach; I prayed that they would intercede on Earth's behalf.

Chapter 50

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 17, 2136

The predators' formation was disintegrating, and it looked likely we would secure victory within the hour. I considered broadcasting an apology to the surface, once Earth's space fleet was exhausted. The unfortunate civilians knew they were witnessing the last day of their civilization. Did the humans not deserve the solace of an explanation?

There was a part of me that wondered if we could've found another way. The issue was their growth and reproduction, which would be exponential if left unchecked. Maybe we could've isolated any humans who surrendered on an abandoned world, sterilizing them to prohibit breeding. That way, the existing primates could live out the rest of their lifespan, without the option to prowl the stars.

What if there was another path to achieve extinction, without the deaths of billions? Ah Kalsim…such thinking is counterproductive.

"Zarn, any update on Thyon?" I asked, hoping for a brief distraction.

The doctor took several seconds to respond. "The first officer is in a medically induced coma, but I've managed to freeze the brain swelling. He'll live, though I can't predict the long-term effects, sir."

Some tension was lifted from my wings, with the assurance that the Farsul would survive. This entire crew needed a piece of good news. We were set to join the next bombing rush; all remaining Federation ships were partaking in this charge. This was the chance to strike down every last craft the humans had limping above-world.

"By the way, I've quite enjoyed the show from my little window. I much preferred it when we thought all of these nasty creatures were dead," Zarn added. "Whatever your predator delusions, you should be proud of yourself, Captain."

I tossed my beak in disdain, not dignifying that statement with a response. Relations between myself and the Takkan practitioner

would be much better if he kept his opinions quiet. My talons swiped through the screens, ensuring that our payloads were in working order. All systems were operational onboard; there was just a small dip in our shield capacity.

Our vessel fell into the rear of the advance, and navigations increased our acceleration. We would have control over the final targets, which might require flexibility. My expertise would come in handy, assigning relative importance to locations. Why did it feel so wrong, to speak about Terran settlements in those terms?

Thoughts of Nishtal's impending invasion weighed on my mind too. There might not be any home to go back to. Krakotl civilization would be the last casualty to Terran brutality, but that didn't ease the horror of it. We might be forgotten by the Federation within decades, just another species that fell to the Arxur. I hoped historians would appreciate our sacrifice.

Alarms flashed on sensors, snapping me out of my torturous musings. Several allied vessels had been picked apart by precision strikes, right beside us. The rear flank was blindsided by hundreds of blips, who were darting in between our flotilla. The newcomers were trying to shove their way to the Terran fortifications.

"Ready weapons, and fire at anything we don't recognize!" I screeched. "Where did these bastards come from? They're a little late if they're humans."

My comms technician shuffled nervously. "I just finished decoding communications between a Terran command post and these vessels. The Zurulians sent military assistance."

"You've got to be joking. The Zurulians have a fledgling, erroneous association with the humans. What have the predators ever done for them?"

Jala snickered. "Never mind that, Captain. I'm pretty sure the Galactic Institute of Medicine and their twenty ships aren't going to tip the scales either way."

"That's not the point! Comms, I need to know these developments *ahead* of time."

"He's right. Stars forbid the Yotul show up with a trebuchet next." The sociopath feigned a swooning motion. "Then we're really screwed!"

I huffed in irritation, watching as our ship turned to face a Zurulian hostile. The quadrupeds gave us a wide berth, and dodged Jala's errant plasma beam. Several Federation captains were calling out conflicting orders on the comms, which led to disarray. Exhaustion was making it difficult to recall foreign military techniques, so I couldn't find solid advice to offer.

The Terran fleet were advancing on our front lines, capitalizing on the breakdown of command. Cursing the Zurulian fools, I barked orders to pull back and regroup within the lunar orbit. This was a waste of precious time, that could be vital to the defense of our home. We weren't going to leave an extermination half-done.

We'll get our bearings, and charge at Earth again. Perhaps we can still accomplish this quickly.

The Federation reassembled, adjusting for the fresh reinforcements. The numerical advantage was still slanted to our side, and prey wouldn't fight half as well as a human. However, it might be difficult for the crew to fire on Zurulians. We had accepted that the Venlil were reduced to predatory thralls, but this race was a new convert.

"The Zurulians chose their side, and they chose wrong. I know it seems harsh to strike them down, but they put themselves here." I surveyed the expressions of my crew, noting how distraught they looked. "If the Arxur are truly attacking our homes, this might cost us our entire civilization. Everything is on the line; there is no time for bargaining."

Jala hissed in frustration, as she realized our missiles were depleted. Perhaps she shouldn't have been so liberal with their usage. The plasma railgun had recharged, but I wasn't sure how low our gas supply was running. We couldn't afford to have only kinetics at our disposal; discretion was required going forward.

The Zurulian fleet fell in beside the humans, though they seemed wary of drawing too close. There was no basis for those fears; the risk of Terrans attacking their allies right now was negligible. These predators were too smart to betray useful assets, that Earth needed so desperately. They weren't just raving beasts.

"Sir, more unknown ships incoming! There's…" my comms technician trailed off.

I blinked. “Where from? How many? Speak!”

“T-thousands. The subspace trails are from all over the place…”

My confusion intensified, and I attempted to stave off my sleep-deprived stupor. The humans didn’t have many Federation allies; to my knowledge, only six could respond in time. Two of those partners were already here. The neutral powers had no intent of interfering either way, since it would simplify their stance if we succeeded.

But no singular Federation race had that many ships at their beck and call. This had to be some sort of group or alliance. Maybe these were weaker species that had been coerced. Others might give into cheap tactics if their homeworlds were held hostage.

That, or the humans had found a way to deceive our sensors. These contacts could be decoys meant to sow confusion. How would such a trick even work though?

The comms analyst scratched her crown. “Sir, we’re picking up a looping transmission from this mystery fleet. It’s directed toward Earth. Putting it on screen now.”

My beak nearly split open, as the video feed materialized. Those slit pupils were the unmistakable identifier of the Arxur. I was uncertain whether their eye shape was solely for ambush hunting, or if they allowed the grays to stalk at dusk. It made human vision seem like love beacons by comparison.

“This is Chief Hunter Isif,” the reptile clicked. “Forgive our tardiness, but we did request that you disable FTL disruptors multiple times. Hang in there, humans. We are here to help.”

A few crewmates were sobbing from the beast’s projection. Even an extermination officer like myself was paralyzed by those dagger-like teeth, jutting from its truncated maw. The length of its gullet, visible as it spoke, was a ghastly sight.

Why were the grays not laughing at the loss of life on Earth? Those demons delighted in death and suffering. They went out of their way to cause it. It didn’t seem within their behavioral pattern to save a weaker sapient, even if that species were predators.

“I don’t understand any of this. How are the Terrans responding?” I stammered.

The comms technician pecked away at her station. “L-lots of chatter from the human coalition. It doesn’t appear their command was expecting the Arxur, though that could be staged for the benefit of their…less vile friends.”

“Shit! The Zurulians and the Venlil can’t be happy about this, can they?”

“No, sir. The Zurulians are demanding to know why the Arxur are here, and the Venlil are asking why they were not informed.”

“The Terran response?”

“The humans claim they didn’t invite the grays, but aren’t in a position to reject their help. They suggest that their allies ‘go with it’, unless they’d prefer to fight the reptilians too. Their response to the Arxur offered thanks, and insisted those two prey races are friendly.”

Of course that’s what the clever monkeys said. They excel in manipulation tactics, and they’re using both parties.

I leaned back on my perch, wondering if this would kill the Zurulians’ ties to humanity. This should unmask the truth about the Earthlings’ long-term goals. Perhaps we could convince the other races to stand with us, but the time spent pleading with them would allow the Arxur to pounce.

If the grays were genuine in their intention, the tide of this battle would turn decisively. The numerical edge was in the Terrans’ favor, with these new additions. Not to mention the psychological impact the Arxur’s presence had; many Federation vessels were panicking at the prospect. We had to break through to orbital range with haste.

“There’s no escape route, and…we stand no chance against the grays. But we can make our deaths mean something to the galaxy,” I squawked on the fleet-wide frequency. “We must get as many bombs off against Earth as possible. All Federation vessels, charge at max velocity!”

The Krakotl and our allies bolted forward, right toward the waiting human alliance. The Zurulians hesitated, not firing on either party. The quadrupeds’ reluctance to abet Arxur allies made them the obvious point of entry. Their railguns were powered up, but few of them acted even as we closed in.

The Zurulians came to a decision, and dropped into defensive positions. Plasma arced straight toward us; I saw my life flash before my eyes. The beam sailed just off to our side, and obliterated the neighboring ally that was keeping pace with us. If their aim was half a degree different, that would've been my vessel in tatters.

There was no time to gawk at the wreckage left behind, with the Arxur swooping in on any stragglers. While I wasn't proud of the extermination itself, our sacrifice was valiant and honorable. The Krakotl fleet knew that most of us were about to die, but the captains had the commitment to finish the job.

"The Arxur are swallowing our rear flank, sir. Their ships are gaining on us faster than we can move," Jala called out. "Should we turn and stall them?"

I puffed out my feathers. "Absolutely not! Keep going!"

According to sensors, the reptilians' maximum speed was much higher than we ever documented. I realized that they had been concealing their technological limits. Two gray bombers selected us as their quarry, and sent drive-tracking missiles in our direction.

Jala shoved the nav officer out of the way, deploying a stream of interceptors in the nick of time. A Terran robot ship had also spotted us, and launched supercharged plasma at our position. We barreled through the Zurulian line with urgency; they were no longer of comparative importance.

My sociopath rerouted all power from shields to the engine. The core was already overheating from exertion, before this stunt. The female Krakotl didn't quite manage to get ahead of the inbound plasma; it plowed into our aft compartment.

Alarms began ringing overhead, while crewmates screeched in terror. My readout informed me that steering was offline. The engine was listed as a critical failure.

We're stuck on a one-way ticket toward Earth. The ship is going to crash…assuming it doesn't get blown to bits first.

"All crew to escape shuttles!" I shrieked, as loud as I could.

The personnel didn't need to be told twice, as the flapping of wings drowned everything out. I took a deep breath; it was up to me to finish the job. We were about thirty seconds from orbital distance, and these two bombs could cross a few million humans off the list.

Jala began to abandon her perch, which earned a withering glare from me.

“Get back here! I know you want to save yourself, but the rest of the crew will kill you for being a ‘predator.’” I jabbed a talon at her, then pointed to the weapons station. “You have no future, no place in society, without me. So you’re going to stay right here until the job is done!”

She hesitated, but was persuaded by my argument. The overhead power flickered out, as the engine began to melt nearby systems. The emergency lighting colored the floorboards a dim hue, and only essential functions were available.

A plethora of enemies were still chasing our runaway ship. With our shield power rerouted away, there was no disincentive to use kinetics. Arxur bullets plowed through our armor, and the Terran automaton chipped in its own lead munitions.

“Requesting assistance in the medbay,” Zarn panted over the comms. “I am unable to carry Thyon on my own…nor am I able to fly the emergency medical pod. Captain? Anyone?”

I sighed. “I will be there in a minute. Hold on, Doctor.”

The Terran robot was recharging its weapons, but struggled to keep up with our unsafe speed. Fear burned through my veins. I offered a silent prayer, that we would survive long enough to complete the mission. It was a few more seconds until we could deploy the anti-matter bombs.

The human contraption didn’t target us, from outside a reliable range. Arxur munitions were inflicting steady damage, but they hadn’t caused any catastrophic explosions yet. We hobbled into orbital range, and established target locks on two Terran cities. Jala slammed her beak on the firing mechanism.

I gave her a nod, and we fled from the bridge with urgency. The journey was a blur, as we swooped down the evacuation stairwell. Jala bowled through the door to the medbay, examining a pacing Zarn.

The Takkan doctor had thrown some supplies in his designated shuttle. I was surprised he hadn’t just left Thyon for dead. The unconscious Farsul had a clump of bandages around his head. It was painful to see him comatose on a cot.

“You took your time!” Zarn spat.

I glared at him. “We came as fast as we could. I think you of all people would want us to make sure the explosives made it to Earth.”

The ship rocked around us, barely swallowing a hit from one of our enemies. There was no time for bickering, if we were to survive. The three of us shouldered Thyon’s weight, and deposited him into the pod’s rear seat. The doctor strapped the injured patient in, as Jala and I brought the shuttle online.

The vibrations intensified around us, likely from our vessel entering Earth’s atmosphere. Without heat shielding on the damaged areas, the main hull was going to be incinerated. Jala closed the exit hatch, and we jettisoned the shuttle. The controls would have to be learned on the fly.

Cerulean skies surrounded us out the window, as we plummeted toward the ground below. The momentum from the ship’s breakneck fall had carried over. I wrestled with the control column, and tried to steady us. Jala flung all power to thrusters, but it could only slow us down so quickly.

No, no, no. We can’t be stranded on a predator’s planet. We have to get back up to our fleet…

Land was rushing up to meet us much too fast, even as our velocity lessened. Impact looked to be an inevitability; there was nothing I could do to prevent it. My body snapped back in the harness, and our shuttle’s belly collided with foreign grass.

Chapter 52

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 17, 2136

Dry air buffeted my face, as we disembarked amidst tall grass. The shuttle crash was bound to attract attention from the humans. I imagined this place would be swarming with troops, if it was anywhere near a military base. We had no idea where we were, or how many predators were in the area.

My breaths were strained as the three of us hauled Thyon's body across a savanna. Sparse trees dotted the vast plain, and a few beasts roamed the landscape. None of the orange predators zeroed in on us, but they were definitely something to avoid. I couldn't see any bipedal human shapes, but it was a matter of time before we ran into one.

It's much easier to fly than to walk. We need to find some place to leave Thyon. A place to shelter…and to sleep would be nice.

On our left, a bank of clay and sediment led down to a small pond. I was thirsty, but given that there were more bright-colored predators bathing in it, I'd stick to our rations. With how tired I was, I didn't feel up to exterminating any threats now.

"This place is infested with predators. Only a few artificial structures," Zarn grunted.

I studied the doctor's grimace. "I don't think humans cull their predator population at all. This is what happens when you don't have extermination officers."

"Can you imagine living on a planet like this? What an uncivilized world."

This alien hellscape could be host to all kinds of nightmarish murder-beasts. The vicious creatures around us had lean, nimble forms, and fangs that put the sapient primates to shame. Most humans were unlikely to set up shop in predator-territory. It could be a very long walk to civilization, from this wilderness.

After a brief pause, we began the laborious trek toward the far-off tree line. The expanse seemed to stretch for kilometers, with no sign

of the nearest settlement. This region's heat was punishing, making me want to collapse in a puddle. No wonder the humans' fur had evolved away.

"We need to put this dead weight down. This Farsul intruder is going to get us all killed!" Jala spat.

I glared at her. "I don't leave my crew members to die. There's wild monstrosities everywhere, and the humans could do *anything* if they stumble across him."

"So what? The rations would be better spent on people who can walk and fight."

"Lives are not trading chips, Jala. Haven't you killed enough people today? I'll leave Thyon when there's an appropriate spot, hidden and secure."

A cave, or any kind of cover, would be a welcome sight. There was no locale devoid of predators to stash Thyon. Leaving him in the open, to be gnawed on by a cast of beasts, wasn't an option. It was unclear how much energy any of us had left; our flock might have to camp among the demons soon.

I was relieved to spot a breaking point in the grass. There was an uneven dirt path, which had faint vehicle marks in its silt. That meant Terrans did stray to this region, from the safety of a metal cage. At least we could communicate with human predators; an isolated one could be threatened into giving us supplies or shelter.

Zarn looked to me with watering eyes. "Kalsim…captain…"

The Takkan doctor heaved some strained breaths, and placed Thyon on the ground. He bent over, trying to catch his breath. Fear was swelling in his amber gaze. The realization that we were stuck on Earth, amidst livid humans, was settling in.

"Humans have definitely visited this place." Jala scanned the red arch in front of us, with the prototype visual translator. "The writing says 'Ranthambore Tiger Reserve'…I'm guessing those orange predators are 'Ranthambore tigers?'"

Alarm awakened my senses. "Reserve, you say…like an area set aside for a specific purpose. The humans intended for this predator growth to happen, Jala?"

"I think so."

“That is peculiar. Why would they want rival, stronger hunters on the loose?”

Even the sociopath seemed stumped by my question. Such animals were not conducive to modern living. Maybe the humans wanted whatever prey the tigers prioritized for themselves, and snatched it away from them once the hard work was finished.

It didn’t make sense. There were much easier ways to feed their hunger, than by stealing from ferocious fiends. I was certain a species with guns could hunt without assistance.

“They like the chaos and the violence,” Zarn panted. “This human war tribe could want to keep out dangerous visitors, especially their own kind. We might be in the most vicious nation on the planet!”

I didn’t know what the truth was, but I was going to assume it wasn’t anywhere close to that. The doctor lacked crucial understanding about humans. Their society was too structured for a state entity to stoke chaos intentionally. It must be something more philosophical in nature.

Given how many galactic religions were organized against predators, it could be that Terrans saw hunters as deities. The Krakotl’s farming goddess, Inatala, brought plants to the universe to feed her children. Predators were considered a perversion of her natural order, who turned to Maltos, the god of violence, out of greed. Our reality was the eternal struggle of good and evil.

I strayed from the faith once I became an extermination officer. The priesthood had a way of twisting the goddess’ teachings; none of it matched with their written beliefs. Maltos wasn’t an inhibitor of empathy, but merely an agent of destruction. We had seen that predators were violent and greedy, while not without some positive qualities.

“I think this is some kind of worship center,” I decided. “Maybe somewhere to pray surrounded by carnage, for hunting success. Or for the expansion of war.”

Jala chuckled. “A religion devoted to bloodshed? How interesting.”

“It *is* interesting, actually. This is why I wanted to preserve their culture…because we understand their kind so little. We’ve become enthralled with violence and killing ourselves, in trying to be pure.”

The doctor curled his lip. “A brutal race doesn’t deserve any legacy

for their culture. I'm enthralled with the punishment of the wicked, not killing itself."

"Your motives are rich with hatred. It poisons you," I hissed. "Now, let's get moving…before the sun finishes setting."

The group hobbled away from the reserve in uneasy silence. There was no telling where the road led, or what animalistic carnage lie ahead. A more spiritual Krakotl would see this as a temptation by Inatala. I had never intended to get up-close-and-personal with human territory; our mission was supposed to be impassive. Distant.

This is a test to my soul, regardless of divine presence. We must face Earth's horrors, without surrendering our values.

As we progressed past a clump of trees, my hearing detected a faint sniffling. It was accompanied by sporadic gasps, so I figured it must be a predator crying. Jala cued in on the sound as well, and drew her sidearm. The female Krakotl looked eager to kill or mock the beast.

Sympathy tugged at my heart, and perhaps a bit of regret. If a human was mourning the devastation we caused, what right did we have to disturb it? Something told me I was outvoted though, so I raised my weapon. The flesh-eaters were too dangerous to leave on the prowl, while we were out in the open. If a single extermination was necessary to safeguard my people, so be it.

I gestured to set the injured Farsul on the grass. "Zarn, watch over Thyon, and alert us if any other predators are approaching."

"I can't wait to see your extermination skills in action," the doctor chuckled.

Jala clicked her beak. "His skills? Kalsim is soft on the humans. But don't worry, I'm going to crack its skull.

"I expect you to be as silent as possible. We don't want it to know we're there, until we have it cornered. Also, let me ascertain some information before you off it."

"What if I want to scare it?" the sociopath drawled.

"The human is not in a stable state of mind now. It could go into a fit of rage on a whim. Let's not push our luck; we just need its shelter."

The female Krakotl curled her neck in disdain, but took cautious

hops forward. My feet glided across the leaves, and I took care to avoid any twigs. A fabric dome, supported by stakes in the earth, was established amidst a clearing. A single human was stretched out on a blanket; it appeared to be watching videos on a handheld device.

Terror swelled in my chest, as my instincts urged me not to approach. The feeling subsided upon drawing closer; secondary observations swayed my emotions. This primate was of a lesser stature than indicated in Noah's data dump. Its skin seemed untouched by aging, and its register lacked the booming growl of males we had spoken to.

If I had to hazard a guess, this human was an adolescent. Perhaps it was crying because it lost its parents; that would explain why it was alone, and had wandered to predator-infested territory. My thoughts began racing with unpleasant images. It took a great deal of effort to push them away.

I stopped a few paces from its blanket. "Put the electronic device down, and slide it to me. Don't even try to alert any…fellow beasts."

The human startled, and pointed its tear-stained eyes at me. Its lips parted with alarm; it flung the device toward me like it burned to the touch. Video footage was still playing on the screen, as predator anchors described the loss of life in a city called Bengaluru. I wondered if that was the kid's home.

"P-please, take whatever you want. Just leave me alone," it whined.

That begging was rather unbecoming of a predator. Maybe it hadn't become desensitized to bloodshed yet. I focused my gun barrel, careful not to keep my grip too close to the trigger.

"We just want to talk," I lied. "What's your name?"

The beast swallowed. "Arjun."

"And your age? You don't look like a human adult."

"I'm 12. Uh, we're not grown-ups 'til we turn 18."

Jala traced her gun barrel across its furless chin, snickering as it shied away. The fear in its gaze twisted my heart; the little beast still had years left of adolescence. It looked harmless, helpless, even. I knew that was deceiving, but it still had an effect.

Little predators become big predators, and reproduce exponentially, my mentor's voice said in my head.

I stared at the shaking primate. "Hey, eyes on me, Arjun. Why are you out here?"

"Dad thought it was a good place to hide. He said you wouldn't target the parks first," Arjun croaked. "If this is the end of the world…we could spend the last day outdoors. Together."

"Alright. I know humans care for their children. Where is your father now?"

"My, uh—my dad is a wildlife photographer. He wanted to get some animal shots with the space battle overhead. It'd be a damn good picture, if we…"

"If you survive."

The predator bobbed its head emphatically, and more tears streamed down its face. The kid's distress was apparent. It would be merciful if I limited the scope of my questions. I didn't want to prolong its suffering; Jala couldn't be allowed to botch the job or make a mess.

Gosh, what if there was a way to curb a human's full-grown instincts? Pulling the trigger on Arjun…that extermination broke my heart already. It would grow into something terrible, but now, it was innocent. It wanted its father.

I struggled to steady my voice. "You're doing great. Can you just tell me what this place is? We were curious about the predatory 'wildlife.'"

"National parks are like an animal sanctuary. We preserve species that are threatened, or have lost their natural habitats."

"Why?! Those orange…tigers are menaces. They'd eat children like you!"

"Tigers don't bother you unless you bother them. They're majestic animals. Lots of people tour this place, and there's resorts, campsites, hiking…"

Disbelief flooded my veins, at the idea that humans wanted to stay in such a dangerous venue. To think that the locals went out of their way to preserve monsters! Arjun's tone had been reverent, but not religious. Did predators find thrills in challenging superior

counterparts?

I cleared my throat. “Thanks. That’s all we need.”

“Finally, the talking is over. So I can kill it?” Jala trilled.

“Er, well, it—”

Its binocular eyes pleaded with me. “No! I helped you.”

I stared at the colorful leaves on the ground, avoiding its gaze. The reds and oranges reminded me of a raging inferno, sparking across a pool of gasoline. The little pups squealed through it all, and their frail silhouettes writhed in agony. I felt like I was watching my handiwork from the truck bed again.

When they looked at you with those big eyes, you wanted to help. But you didn’t. You wouldn’t.

I couldn’t help but feel that our mission had been wrong. The thoughts of how the predators tugged at my talons, playfully, was still a vibrant memory. Looking at Arjun, it was impossible not to recall that first extermination. Younglings didn’t deserve merciless death.

“Captain Kalsim?” Jala squawked.

I blinked. “Leave the predator alive. It’s not a threat.”

“Not a threat?” Zarn’s voice made me startle, as I found him looming over my shoulder. “It’s an offshoot of flesh-eating barbarians. What kind of extermination officer are you?”

“Doctor, I told you to wait with Thyon!”

“Well, I was worried you’d do exactly this, predator-lover. Jala, you don’t have to listen to him. Kill that thing!”

Arjun was curled up into a ball, shielding its head with an elbow. The female Krakotl’s eyes twitched, and I could sense her temptation. I had to reel in the rebellious sadists, before I lost control. Admitting my actions were borne from sympathy would be suicide.

“I’m no predator lover! How dare you?” I roared, shoving my beak in Zarn’s face. “I’m a skilled extermination officer, while you’re someone who sits on the sidelines. Talk is easy.”

The doctor stiffened. “You just said—”

“That *thing* is the only bargaining chip we have. Humans value their

children, so keeping it as a prisoner is the logical choice. Maybe we can make them trade us a spaceship. Food. Medicine, you arrogant fool!"

The Takkan gulped nervously, and slunk back a few steps. He stole a glance at Arjun, before swishing his tail in defeat. Jala also scrutinized my enraged form. I met her stare for several seconds, goading her on.

She lowered her weapon. "Using their kids against them. As a shield, maybe! I like it."

"I knew you would." I exhaled a silent breath of relief, and turned to the doctor. "Sedate this human, Zarn, like you did with Marcel. Adjust for weight. I need sleep, and I can't watch a ravenous predator."

The Takkan nodded, and filled a syringe with a light sedative dose. I watched which vial he grabbed, making sure he wasn't loading it with poison. The physician handed it over to me for administration. A quick jab plunged the needle into the human's neck; hopefully it was only a light pinch.

It should knock Arjun out for a few hours. When I was rested and able to think again, I would be able to deal with the predator. There was no telling how long it would act obedient.

The greater challenge would be restraining my companions from tormenting the child. We'd failed to eradicate the Earthlings, and its continued survival was simply an admission of failure. There was no reason for a stranded crew to dole out needless death.

Chapter 52

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

The UN fleet deposited me in a cell on Venlil Prime, and without warning, the predators stopped visiting me altogether. Based on the claw tallies on the wall, I calculated that it had been at least a week. The Venlil guards were colder than the humans. One of them spit in my evening gruel, and muttered a curse against my 'depraved soul.' Against all odds, I found myself missing Carlos and even Samantha.

I kept busy by contemplating the Arxur's interrogation, and how to refute their absurd story. There had to be reconciliation between the Terrans and the Federation. It had required an unthinkable cost, but the Gojid government was swayed to the humans' corner. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Piri's death was confirmed by UN ground forces; her final transmission could only achieve so much.

"I offered to bargain with the Federation for them, but then, the humans abandoned me. They're just gone," I mused aloud.

If I strained on my hindlegs, I could peer between out the window to the capital below. Venlil Prime was a massive planet that dwarfed the likes of Earth and the cradle. By comparison, it had a shorter orbit and slightly higher gravity than the average world.

Interestingly, much of its land-mass was inhospitable. Sunlight never touched half of its surface, leaving it too cold for plant and animal life. Its bright side had the opposite problem, too scorching hot to sustain water sources. There was only the thin space between extremes to build settlements.

Venlil scientists searched for new ways to push the frontiers, with various methods to cool their planet. They manipulated atmospheric reflectivity with aerosols, built an artificial upwelling system in their ocean, and used cloud seeding to generate rainfall. It took colossal effort to keep the gears in motion.

Not all species are blessed with a perfect home. If it weren't for sentiment, Venlil colonies are much more conducive to habitation.

The sight of human predators walking about became more frequent, over the past few days. Many Venlil would give them a wide berth, or cross to the other side of the street. I wondered why Earth was suddenly sending so many people abroad. Such a widespread presence was a lot to ask of their friends.

A pointed cough came from the other side of the cell door. “Enjoying the view? Looks like you’ve had *plenty* of time to study the intricacies of Venlil society.”

I whirled around to see Samantha, with her auburn hair tied back in a knot. Her predatory eyes were unfocused, as though her mind was elsewhere. The anger in her voice bore a colder aspect than last time I saw her. My instincts pronounced her demeanor as highly threatening.

Was there something I had done to infuriate the humans? Or worse, were they becoming corrupted by the Arxur?

“H-hello, Sam. I thought you guys had forgotten about me,” I answered.

She bared her pearly fangs, eyes dilating in a flash. “My friends call me Sam. You’re not my friend.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“That you should be.”

Bootsteps sounded behind Samantha, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I recognized Carlos. For a moment, I thought the female had snuck in alone to assault me. Everything about her stance screamed that she was thirsty for blood. Maybe it was simply not seeing a human in days, but I felt there was some substance to my inference.

There was a jingling sound as the male guard slid keys into the door. The spark was gone from his brown eyes, and his subdued mannerisms were uncharacteristic. The last time I saw Carlos, he was ribbing me and striking down my thoughts at every turn. There was no sign of playful mockery or admonishment now.

My spines bristled in alarm. “What happened to you both? Something is wrong.”

Carlos gave me a weary frown. “Earth was attacked by the Federation. Over a billion dead.”

“Don’t pretend like you care. You got what you wanted, Sovlin,”

Samantha growled.

Horror washed over me, and I sank back onto my bed. No wonder the humans were upset. I remembered what it felt like to watch the cradle burn, to grapple with the loss of my home and culture. Why did the Federation have to piss off the only species to defeat the Arxur?

There was a time where I wanted to cripple the 'predators' breeding grounds'; that derogative terminology still rang in my ears. When I turned myself in to UN custody, I was expecting to witness a brutal society. Instead, Earth amounted to decent people going about their daily existences. It was a structured planet, rich in life and culture.

"That's not what I want now." I nibbled at my claws with anxiety, and tried to keep my expression submissive. "I'm sorry for your loss. I…know what it's like to be in your paws."

Samantha clenched her fists. "Of course you do. You caused your world's death, while trying to kill us. Just like the Krakotl."

"You're right. We brought it on ourselves, and I know that. We were horrible to humans, more so than any apology could ever excuse. Yet you showed mercy and compassion."

"Fuck mercy. The rest of our fleet went home. But we get tethered to you, while Earth is under siege. How is that fair?"

"It's not, but I have no say in that. I can see you're hurting. Er, if it makes you feel better to quarrel with me, then I…encourage you to do so."

Samantha turned her back in disgust. There was no way for me to offer amends that would satisfy her. All the same, my concern for her mental health was escalating. I knew how grief could swallow a person without a proper outlet.

I cast an inquisitive stare toward Carlos, looking for direction. The male guard's nostrils flared with pent-up frustration. Had the humans only visited to extol their anger on me?

"I'm glad you're both okay," I added, breaking the icy silence. "I hope some of Earth was able to hold out."

Carlos nodded. "We drove them off…with help."

"Help? From the Venlil?"

"Sure. And other interested parties."

That is a vague descriptor. Who else would've come to rescue humanity?

Carlos waved for me to follow him, and the absence of his snarl was striking. It was like the guards had received a personality transplant. Both seemed infused with hatred and impassivity, though one was directing it at me more than the other. I was frightened of what their predatory emotions could compel them to do.

Dark thoughts raced through my mind, as I tried to recall why I trusted these predators. Their heroism on the cattle ship seemed a distant memory. My eyes widened in alarm, at consideration of the rescued. That reminded me of the Gojids on Earth, cared for outside a large metropolis.

"What happened to the Gojid refugees?" I blurted. "I'm sorry if that's selfish, but I have to know…"

The male guard sighed. "The primary camp was brought to Venlil Prime, when we started moving human evacuees. Most are safe."

"That is…positive news. How many humans did you evacuate from Earth?"

"Millions. We've known the Venlil all of three months. Some people preferred to ride it out in a bunker, or were banking on us to rout their forces."

"Stop talking to that racist, delusional prick like he's your pal!" Samantha spat. "Carlos, I thought we had this conversation."

The olive-skinned human crossed his arms. "I'm being civil. There's a difference."

Not wanting to sow more division between the duo, I kept my other questions to myself. That did explain why the human presence had increased rapidly. The cynical part of me wondered if the predator influx resulted in a spike in crime. The primates posed an extraordinary threat when they were angry…and they had to be more prone to deviant behavior than Venlil.

Carlos led the way past native wardens, and we stepped out into the capital's crisp air. The guards' strides seemed a bit strained from gravitational exertion. The difference on Venlil Prime wasn't enough to be significant, but the humans would tire quicker in physical activities. It was another reminder that they weren't home.

A pair of Gojids were waiting by a spacecraft outside, joined by several UN personnel. My eyes widened as I realized why they were familiar. It was the deaf youth, Talpin, and his sister, Berna. Both seemed to be in better spirits than the last time I saw them, and were carrying necessities.

I can't believe I thought the humans were going to kill the kid, first time I saw him. We all shared that thought.

"Hello, Captain Sovlin." A synthesized voice spoke the words in the Gojid tongue, but with a bit of human growl. Talpin must have been given an AI program with Terran phonemes installed. "Why are you being kept in a prison? You are a hero to us all."

The young Gojid finished sliding his claws across a keyboard, and fixed me with an expectant look. I didn't want to recount my crimes in detail; then again, I wasn't sure how to begin translating my reply. At least Samantha seemed mollified by Talpin's presence. Perhaps it served as a reminder of her deaf brother.

"I deserve to be there. I made another person…a human, suffer," I muttered.

Talpin turned his pupils to a nearby human, and scanned the contortions of their fingers. His eyes widened. The adolescent struggled to believe that I could be involved with anything nefarious. His beige claws hovered over the keyboard for a moment, before he typed out a reply.

"Why?" came the synthesized question. "Your deeds are spoken of in legend. You are a hero, a righteous man. You save lives."

I lowered my gaze. "I'm none of those things. I thought causing a predator pain would fix my problems."

Berna appeared stunned as well. "You sound like you're talking about torture, Sovlin. That's…vile. The humans are sweet, sensitive…generous."

I blinked in agreement, lowering my gaze. The predators beside Talpin projected fondness toward him, but I could see their jaws tightening as they listened to me. At least if Berna spread the word about Marcel, my people would squash the myth of my heroism. I deserved to have my legacy tarnished, and to be remembered for the sum of my crimes.

Talpin tapped at his keyboard. "How could the humans treat you so

kindly?"

"I don't know. Ask them," I answered.

The UN volunteer beside him thought for a moment, before launching into an emphatic reply. The human translator seemed passionate about whatever she was conveying. The deaf Gojid looked impressed at what was passed on, and nodded in acceptance. He shot me a disdainful look.

I cast a nervous glance at Samantha. "You speak 'sign language.' What did she tell him?"

The guard flashed her teeth. "That you deserve to live with what you've done. That human discipline doesn't stoop to your level."

Well, that was a recurring sentiment when predators spoke of me. What I didn't understand was why the guards brought me to meet Talpin and Berna. It looked like the two Gojids were about to depart on a spaceship. After my disclosure, I doubted they'd want a send-off from me.

"I don't want to travel anywhere with him." Talpin waved his claws emphatically at the predators. "Not if he tortured a human. He is a disgrace to our kind."

Berna curled her lip. "I second the notion. We both owe humanity our lives."

My confusion intensified, and I shot Carlos a questioning look. Talpin seemed to think I was accompanying them on a trip, but I didn't have an inkling what he was referring to. Where were the humans taking them? Was I actually involved?

"Sovlin is the perfect person to pass on several messages for us. He can get you two through the door with those Kolshian bastards." The male guard tossed his shoulders in a noncommittal gesture. "He's also the one some Federation fuckwits might believe about the Gojid refugees and the war."

That was a good omen if the humans still wanted peace and dialogue. Maybe the attack on Earth hadn't completely pushed them to the Arxur side, as improbable as that seemed. These Terran predators had a merciful side, and I hoped we could appeal to that.

It didn't sound like the entirety of the Federation was involved; the neutrals had minded their own business. There had to be some

people that could convert to Terran advocacy. Other races didn't have to end up like the Gojids.

Warmth filled my chest. "A messenger? I'd be happy to testify on your behalf, and broker peace with your enemies. I know about remediation—"

Samantha scowled. "Peace is not an option anymore. Frankly, I'd declare war on all of the skeptics now, but we can't fight 300 species at once. At least, not yet. We're going to purge the 24 who attacked us, followed by the 14 others who voted for war."

"W-what? That's the message?" I gasped.

Carlos shook his head. "No; I'll get to that in a minute. Firstly, we need someone who can look into several items for us."

"Read this. We had it printed in your tongue, extra special for you," the female guard sneered.

My shaking claws accepted the pamphlet, terrified at what the predators had inscribed. The paper nearly slipped from my grasp at once; mournful tears pooled in my eyes. Recel was dead…killed by his own government for siding with humanity.

I had mentored the Kolshian since he was a child, and shepherded his development. His advice on the bridge, combined with his honor, was steadfast. I wanted him commanding my ship in my absence. It pained me that our last interactions were him viewing me as a monster.

My vision burned, and I dabbed at the wetness with my fur. The humans wanted to uncover why the Kolshians would resort to murder. It was unclear whether any future violence was planned against pro-human factions, but the predators weren't taking threats lightly. Not after Earth.

The Terrans don't want species reaching out with false friendship. They want anyone who plots against them exposed. Humiliated.

Why would the scholarly Commonwealth be so opposed to humanity's diplomatic outreach? I was itching to demand Chief Nikonus' reasons for myself. He came across as a fair leader, reasonable to a fault. I would've considered him the kind who would give predators a fair shake.

"Look into the Kolshian matter for us, and find documentation of

first contact with the Arxur. See what you can dig up," Carlos growled.

Samantha crossed her arms. "We need to know who's complicit in every scheme against us and our allies. Who is worth sparing…who started this predator hatred and why."

The male guard narrowed his eyes. "Our governments believe that you feel remorse, that you're not a flight risk. This is what we need from you, Sovlin."

"Okay. And the message?" I stammered. "You implied there was a statement to deliver."

"Oh, that's easy. Tell the Federation we're done contacting or negotiating with them. They never raised a finger to stop the attack on Earth. Let the neutrals know that they either reach out to condemn this terrorist act, or they can prepare for total war."

That message sent a chill through my blood; the other Gojids looked horrified as well. I needed to find a more tactful way of phrasing that flagrant threat, if there was to be peace with any species. The humans could rack up a lot of collateral damage, in seeking revenge for their Earth.

Chapter 53

Memory transcription subject:*UN Secretary-General Elias Meier*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

There was something uncivilized stirring in my soul, as heartbreaking images flooded in from Earth. Seeing historic cities pounded into rubble, and hearing tales of incalculable devastation was a gut-wrenching blow. It had been a mere three months since the first contact mission. In that span, twenty-five species had taken concrete actions to genocide human civilians, without the slightest provocation.

Grappling with my own actions…my own failure weighed heavily upon me. I was responsible for mankind's future, and I hadn't used every option at our disposal. What if there was something else I could've done? Was I a coward for abandoning Earth, especially to bargain with the metaphorical devil?

It would take years to rebuild our homeworld. 112 bombs had detonated on its surface, churning up contaminants and killing more than a billion. Reversing the atmospheric pollution would be a gruesome challenge, and we would witness more casualties in the aftermath.

Strange how it wasn't humans who leveled our planet. I always thought it would be us who were our undoing.

"Elias? We're docking at the luxury resort on Titan station in 60 seconds." Dr. Kuemper, the current Secretary of Alien Affairs, tapped my shoulder. "Are you going to be up to this? You look unwell."

My first thought was always diplomacy in the past; brutal warfare was something that I thought best relegated to our ancestors. It should feel monstrous for a pacifist leader, to long to see our enemies' worlds desolated down to their cores. But now, I couldn't see myself restraining the generals; their path seemed the only way.

I craved the Federation's destruction as an organization. Regardless of the understanding that a small percentage were involved in the attack, their bigotry was incompatible with our survival. How many species had aided us? A mere two, excluding the Arxur's unexpected arrival.

The Zurulians were the only new race I cared to bargain with, in the aftermath. The words of friendship other diplomats spoke proved to be empty. None of them backed us when it came down to it. The bystanders felt every bit as sinister as the Krakotl and their pals in this moment.

“Your head has to be in this, Elias, no matter how impossible that is,” Kuemper said gently. “We can’t afford any mishaps, when ten thousand Arxur ships are still in the Sol system.”

I met her eyes. “I never meant for them to come here. This wasn’t what—”

“The grays already knew where Earth was; you couldn’t have known that. For what it’s worth, they did save our asses.”

Staving off my self-pity, my thoughts returned to the urgent matters at hand. The Arxur decimated the Krakotl strike force with an excess of arrivals. It was concerning that the reptiles had so many vessels in this sector. Chief Hunter Isif kept his fleet in orbit to protect us from secondary attacks, but I couldn’t help but to think they were scrutinizing us.

The unpleasant reality was that the reptiles could plunder or conquer Earth now, if they wanted. We were vulnerable, and the heavy losses left military defenses sparse. The Dominion’s philosophy was still reprehensible to me, a far cry from the UN’s modicum of equality. However, at this point, we had to keep the Arxur sated at all costs.

So when Isif requested an audience with me by name, I chartered the first ship I could find off Venlil Prime. Governor Tarva, bless her heart, squeaked out an offer to join me, but I wasn’t going to place her in the line of fire. The Arxur hunter understood our inability to accommodate him on Earth. He agreed to wait in Titan’s travel lodging for my arrival.

I don’t like rolling out the red carpet for someone who called the Venlil a delicacy and referred to Tarva as dinner. I’d like to punch him in the nose for saying that.

“Kuemper, do you think that the Arxur are capable of societal change?” I asked, as our ship completed its landing protocol. “If, let’s say, they had a stable, non-sapient food source?”

The former-SETI employee tilted her head. “I don’t know. The grays

weren't always like this, but they altered their gene pool…I don't know if they still have art. Whether they indulge in empathy."

"That is the mystery. By the way, can you set up a comms link with the Zurulian fleet in 15 minutes? We have some damage control on that front."

"I'll do that, *after* I hear that you're alright, from your own lips. You need to hear yourself say it."

"I am fine. Once these alien visitors are handled, it's time to bring every government together. Then, to rally the people behind our banner…and remind them not to give up."

My shoes clicked on the decadent marble floor, and the crystal overhang reflected the colors of the rainbow from above. A glass viewport stretched the length of the lobby, complete with interactive holograms and exquisite telescopes. I observed a surreal view of Saturn, as I passed the vacated concierge desk. This was considered the nicest hotel in space; for the sake of Earth's survivors, I hoped the Arxur agreed.

I felt awkward approaching the suite given to Isif. There was no question that the reptile could snap me in half with his jaws, if he desired. Given the aggressivity the Arxur were prone to, and how they detested weakness, this was gambling with my welfare. But with humanity's precarious position, someone had to pacify the baby-killers.

I rapped my knuckles against the door. "Hello?"

My voice couldn't have sounded more uncertain, and I cursed my nerves. The door creaked open; a pair of slit pupils surveyed me from the pitch-black interior. Isif didn't have any lights on, which added to my unease. He towered over me by at least a foot and a half, showing teeth longer than my finger.

The alien's tongue flittered. "Elias Meier. Two names, yes? We meet in person; come in."

I clasped both hands behind my back, and attempted to keep my strides even. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed three other Arxur scattered about the living room. It was a safe assumption that they were advisors, servants, or military personnel. Perhaps it was a mistake to come alone, or even conveyed that I lacked support.

“Thanks for your military assistance,” I croaked, pawing at my dry throat. “I’m sorry, do you have any water nearby?”

Isif tossed a water bottle at me, and I barely reacted in time to catch it. The liquid was lukewarm, but I chugged it with gratitude. The grays seemed to be dissecting my every move, like a specimen under a microscope. There was never a plan for formal first contact with the Arxur; I wasn’t sure where to begin.

We were supposed to be using the grays to get the Krakotl off our back. Now…

“Would you like our assistance with rescue efforts? Human command indicated that your ground residents may react poorly to us walking the streets,” Isif growled.

I scratched my head in discomfort. “Er, I suggest asking each nation specifically. I’m sure some would accept the offer…and I appreciate it very much. Thank you, from us all, the people of Earth are in your debt and—”

The Arxur curled his lip. “Hey, relax. You’ve gone through a lot, human. Don’t worry about offending us; I prefer honesty.”

“Right. Well, many people did not have a favorable view of your species prior to this. Myself included. I don’t imagine that will change overnight, especially with xenophobia abounding.”

Isif’s eyes glittered in the darkness, narrowing to the point that they were hardly open. His nostrils flared, and he seemed to meditate on a scent for a second. His grin intensified; I wondered if he could smell my nervousness. The chief hunter’s gaze moved to the holopad clipped to my belt.

“We wish to access your system’s internet,” the reptile continued, in a polite rumble. “My scientists here requested documentation of your hunting and domestication, specifically. It would also answer if your research is…remotely professional.”

I nodded. “Alright. Though we’re quite different types of predators, er, I have no issue with sharing those search results.”

My holopad made its way into my hands, and I punched the keyword ‘domestication’ into a search engine. An online encyclopedia article popped up as the top result, which should be sufficient. Unless I deemed it a necessity, I was going to try to conceal our persistence hunting ancestry. It might make the Arxur

view us as a serious threat, due to our ability to weather a war of attrition.

Isif snatched the device from my grip. The hunter must be quite eager to learn about us; I wasn't sure whether that was a positive sign or not. Perhaps the Dominion was assessing whether we shared their child-munching fervor. They could also be checking if we were on board with culling our 'weaker' population. Had I just tipped them off, by admitting our disdain for them?

"Fascinating. So humans did use animals for labor and livestock purposes, like us," he murmured. "However, you keep 'pets' too. Lesser beings coddled for entertainment and companionship, in return for emotional benefits to their 'owners'. This is a normal practice?"

"Yes."

"This behavior is derived from a pack predator's social needs, I would presume. And you care for these pets like they are part of your tribe, I assume?"

"Usually. Many humans struggle with living alone."

"An opposite to how we tire of company in swift fashion. Your affinity for the Venlil stems from this pet category, does it not?"

It took a great effort to refrain from a reflexive denial. I would never classify sapient beings, especially our friends, as animalistic playthings. But if the Arxur could view the Venlil as mere pets, that would be an upgrade to cattle consideration. It might make the reptiles willing to facilitate the release of the Venlil captives.

Remember, the grays might require a 'predatory' basis to accept our claims. Whatever concessions must be made to stall, to convince them we're on the same side…just do it.

"Yes. Humans love adopting companion animals," I grumbled.

Isif glared at his advisors. "Satisfied about the Venlil? I told you that humans are just social predators, and those animals are a misapplication of their evolution."

An Arxur scientist coughed uneasily. "Humans are the first documented pack predator sapients, sir. It was reasonable to ask why."

"You're dismissed. Wander until you are summoned, so that Elias

Meier and I may talk in private. There are discussion matters that are above your clearance level."

The reptilian subordinates swished their tails, and slunk off in obedience. Isif watched them depart, exhaling a hearty sigh. He pressed my holopad back into my hands, and searched my gaze with his own. There was a certain trepidation in his dark orbs. He waited in silence for a full minute, clearly apprehensive of prying ears.

I studied the alien's mannerisms with curiosity. Was the chief hunter expecting mutiny from his own ranks? How disciplined was Arxur command? Something told me his private divulgence would be enlightening, as to what he expected from humanity.

"I'm sure you intend for Earth to repay your assistance with some form of compensation," I said.

Isif bared his fangs. "Oh, you will, Elias Meier, but not today. In the future."

"I don't follow."

"The fact is, you don't like that we keep the prey sapients as food. That is your entire issue with us; it violates your moral code. I'm not blind."

This commander could not realize we had backed the Federation with full-throated support. We didn't want the Dominion classing the UN as an enemy now. I tried to maintain my best poker face, though the Arxur seemed to see through my neutral expression. My silence must have confirmed his suspicions, but what could I say?

I shrugged. "We're different. Humans, well—"

"You haven't bred out your empathetic people. I thought…you could help us attain an alternative food source." Isif's voice was hardly more than a whisper, and he looked jumpy. "That is why I sent our entire sector fleet to your aid. My species could have a better future, someday, with your guidance. Beyond war and cruelty."

"What?! A week ago, you gave me a speech about what a delicacy the Venlil are. Called our beloved ally 'dinner,'" I hissed.

The reptile sighed. "Tarva had some spunk, for prey, actually. Don't be unreasonable. I was recording that transmission in front of my

crew, and also sending it home. I like my head attached to my body, human."

My eyes widened. It wasn't a shock that the Arxur Dominion executed anyone who spoke out against their policies. However, it was encouraging news if some high-ranking officers didn't toe the party line. None of our captives saw any issue with the atrocities; they had boasted about how sophisticated their ideology was.

Cattle ships could be stocked with the true believers. Not the best sample size, I suppose.

"So you don't support your race's farming practices?" I pressed.

A growl rumbled in Isif's throat. "I'd prefer food that doesn't talk. This war has gone on long enough, and your…allies have shown me that some of them could accept predators. If we're reduced to our animal instincts, we're no different than the Federation."

"I concur on the instincts. Fine, I'll bite. Why are you telling me this?"

"So that you understand that I'm on your side, and you'll be more forthcoming with the future compensation. If you don't push your luck, I might be able to bargain for the release of more friends."

That was enough to pique my interest. Liberating any captive Zurulians might make them a bit more forgiving of our Arxur saviors. Humanity had to reward the 'teddy bears' for their fealty somehow; they sent aid without any history between our worlds. It also meant that Isif might follow through with the Venlil deal.

I still clung to the hope that one day, we could end all sapient farms. No matter what the Federation had done to our two species, eating and torturing children wasn't the answer. Downplaying or excusing atrocities wasn't going to bring back London or Los Angeles. Mankind was better than that.

I cracked my knuckles. "How on Earth are you going to sell mercy to your government?"

"Simple; not phrasing it as treasonous 'mercy,'" Isif chuckled. "Just stating it as reclaiming the farming glory of our ancestors. Talking about how simple prey breed quicker. I work within the powers that be."

"Clever thinking. I'll do what I can to uphold our bargain, though

our production capacity is limited now."

"Human, I'm understanding. Rational. Don't starve your people for this Venlil deal. What's important is that we're allies in the long run."

This Arxur wasn't a feral creature that saw hunting as life's sole joy. There was an empathetic capability in his concern for human life, and that weariness of the war he was born into. He projected an aura of sincerity, in contrast to their reputation. That was more than I saw in the Krakotl and their ilk. I wondered what this predator race would have been, without outside interference.

"Thanks, Isif. If you are certain you can control your people, I'll find amenable places for you to direct your assistance," I whispered.

Humor flashed in his eyes. "Anything for a friend. Though I presume you don't want me to share our food stash?"

I hesitated. "Actually, if you have extra herbivore feed, it might be edible to us. We're omnivores."

"Ha, you *are* leaf-lickers! Duly noted. I'll see what I can do."

This encounter went better than I anticipated, but unpleasantries were still ahead with the Zurulian call. Even if Isif had given us grounds to work with, a Federation and Arxur confrontation was a powder keg. I didn't want it going off in the Sol system. Humanity had to find a way to smooth the ruffled fur, and keep two polar opposite species on our side.

Chapter 54

Memory transcription subject:*UN Secretary-General Elias Meier*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

After bidding farewell to the Arxur commander, I made my way to the conference hall. This hotel was once a primary site for technological conventions, expensive weddings, and even celebrity events. Now, while the catering and décor was missing, it was still a lavish enough venue to field a call to the Zurulians.

My headquarters on Earth probably didn't exist anymore; the government needed a temporary base of operations. Secretary Kuemper extended invitations to every world leader, with the option to attend virtually. Many would be unable to procure space transportation, while others wouldn't want to leave during a crisis.

"Sir, the Zurulian ambassador is waiting on a secure channel," Kuemper offered.

I straightened my posture. "Good. Patch him through."

The adorable face that appeared on screen was enough to soften my demeanor. Chauson's brown fur looked fluffy as a cloud, and remained just as shaggy around his cub-like ears. The side-facing eyes made him look like an anxious teddy bear. I suspected that visage would fill most humans with the urge to scoop them up and hug them.

The Zurulian narrowed his eyes. I stifled a giggle at how stern he was trying to look; the expression was almost comical. That would be an inappropriate reaction, given how they felt about the Arxur's arrival. It would be preferable to keep these cute aliens as allies.

"This is Secretary-General Meier. Thank you for taking our call, and for your timely assistance," I offered.

"I am sorry for what happened to Earth." Chauson pawed at his nose, a forlorn twinkle in his eyes. "But, my colleagues and I have some concerns. I believe you didn't invite the Arxur…but you haven't tried to push them away."

"The consequences of aggravating the grays would be severe, and inadvisable with our current readiness. Candidly, we need the help. There isn't exactly an outpouring of aid from the galactic

community."

The Zurulian began licking his paw, which his species did when thinking. The absent-minded grooming was distracting. I couldn't stop my lips from curving up, despite knowing it was a hostile gesture to their brains. The cuteness was melting away even my practiced composure.

"There is something amusing about not having aid for your planet, Mr. Meier?" Chauson yipped.

I shook my head quickly. "No, not at all, Ambassador. My apologies."

"Right. I've talked the Zurulian commanders into writing a more favorable report. We're going to do our best to neutralize the headlines, but I'd still expect incendiary accusations."

"I understand…and thank you for trusting us."

It wouldn't surprise me if certain media outlets ran with the 'predators scheming together' narrative. Having the Arxur in our court was the fuel Federation factions needed to turn on us, but I didn't care. Humanity was done crawling through mud to appease paranoid bigots. Species were either for us or against us, and they needed to decide which side pronto.

In the long run, our Zurulian neighbors looked to be decent friends. I couldn't imagine their fleet's thought process when the Arxur arrived; it would be understandable if they left at the sight of grays and humans fighting side-by-side. The fact that the quadrupeds stayed meant it was worth justifying our position.

"It's the least I could do," Chauson purred. "We want to help with the rescue efforts…we have thousands of hospital ships in the system you call Proxima Centauri. That's where I am now. Our military may be unimpressive, but our doctors are second to none."

"Medical assistance would be appreciated, Ambassador. Please, send them at your earliest convenience." My voice took on a pleading lilt, contemplating Earth's desperation. "If there's any information you need about human biology…"

"The Venlil data has given us a baseline. But the issue is sending unarmed civilians into an Arxur occupation. I want to help you, but how do I authorize that order?"

“You want me to get rid of the grays first.”

“Yes, for our safety.”

“Chauson, with respect, they haven’t attacked a single one of your ships so far.”

“I’m sure that the monsters who snack on our cubs have benevolent intentions toward the Zurulian race. I should invite them over for dinner.”

“That’s not what I meant. Human lives are—”

“What about our lives? These are good, selfless people.”

With emergency services down in most metropolitan areas, there was nobody to respond to medical calls. Anyone who suffered a heart attack, or sustained serious injuries was on their own. I would prefer Zurulian medics tending to our people, rather than famished Arxur. That said, Isif’s forces were the only protection Earth had right now; we needed both of their offerings.

“As I said, I am unwilling to aggravate the Arxur now,” I replied. “But I’m confident this commander will not attack your doctors.”

Chauson bared his tiny teeth. “You can’t be confident enough. The Arxur are not trustworthy; they’re sapient-eating fiends.”

“I know. But there are good people on Earth that need your help, and I believe the grays will stand down if asked. Please, trust my judgment, this one time.”

“Oh…dammit, human. I’ll send the medical ships, but if anything happens to them, this is the last Zurulian aid you’re getting. We’re *not* expendable.”

I inwardly cursed this gamble. “Thank you. Kuemper, please contact the Chief Hunter. Let him know the inbound fleet are rescue workers, and are not to be harmed.”

The Secretary of Alien Affairs departed with haste. The Zurulian scientist began pacing in a nervous daze, as he sent a transmission to his men. Humanity would remember the quadrupeds’ heroism for generations; I didn’t know how we could thank them enough. A close-knit alliance might form out of this tragedy.

What am I going to do about the other ‘friendly’ diplomats? They showed just how much they care for predator lives.

A bipedal sapient popped up in front of the camera, as though my thoughts summoned him. His coarse pelt was the tone of a red fox, and his face had some white markings. I racked my brain, identifying him as a Yotul. It was all I could do not to launch into a tirade against his inaction. What was Ambassador Laulo doing with Chauson?

“I’m sorry about Earth too,” the marsupial barked. “Humans have been the only ones that treated us as equals, rather than a charity case.”

I narrowed my eyes, and forced myself to maintain a level tone. “The Zurulians didn’t mention we had company. What can I do for you?”

“I just want you to know we do care about what happened to humanity. Stars, I feel stupid saying this out loud. I really wish we could’ve helped like Chauson.”

“Those words are easy to say, aren’t they? Why didn’t the Yotul raise a claw?”

The Zurulian ambassador watched in silence, flicking his ears in discomfort. I urged myself to rein in my fury, for his sake. This wasn’t a discussion to have in front of our newest allies; holding the bystanders accountable could alienate our neighbors.

Laulo averted his gaze. “We don’t have our own fleet yet to send you, so, ah, I guess we’re useless to you. We’re the newest uplifts… guess you think we’re worthless primitives now too.”

I mulled over his explanation in silence. That did alter my perspective, if the Yotul hadn’t developed any military assets to mobilize. It didn’t sound like the Federation had done anything more than dump technology in their lap, and expect them to figure it out. Perhaps the apologetic sentiment was worth something.

“Anyhow, I scrounged up millions of volunteers to help you rebuild,” the uplift grumbled. “We have lots of untapped resources, and it’s labor if you want it. We’d…need external transport to get to Earth. I’m sorry that my offer is so…underwhelming.”

I raised my hands in reassurance. “We would love any help you’re willing to extend. Aid doesn’t have to come in a military form, Laulo. Maybe we can teach you a thing or two about our engineering.”

“Really? You would do that?”

“Of course. We’re still new to Federation technology ourselves. The two of us can figure out their secrets together.”

The Yotul’s expression was the image of relief, as he squeezed his eyes shut. I felt sorry for the poor guy, if he was expecting to be rebuked for technological deficiencies. Perhaps this exchange was reason enough for me to move the goalposts. Anyone who offered assistance would be in my good graces, whether it was military or not.

Some of our allies might’ve been too scared to fight, which could be fixed. They might’ve been too far away, or didn’t have spare military resources.

Chauson gave the uplift a friendly nudge. “You can ask us for help too. I knew I was right to bring you along.”

“I apologize if I snapped at you, Laulo…it’s been a difficult 48 hours,” I muttered. “Have you guys heard anything from the other human-allied races?”

The Zurulian sighed. “No, I’m afraid not.”

I pursed my lips. If no additional species expressed the slightest concern for our predicament, that lessened the possibility of extenuating circumstances. According to my sources, the Mazics and the Sivkits hadn’t been partial to us. Maybe the absent races had blamed us for killing their diplomats because of our “predatory compulsions.”

Should I even bother reaching out to any of them?

My throat felt dry. “Well, I appreciate both of you. Please, keep in touch if you have any concerns.”

Chauson waved a paw. “Wait, Meier? I know now may not be the right time, but there was an idea I’d like to mention at least.”

“Go on.”

“The Zurulians and the Yotul are both interested in a human exposure program,” Laulo chimed in. “Like you did with the Venlil at first contact.”

Chauson flicked his ears. “Obviously, some civilians are going to be sharply exposed with rescue efforts. But I still think it’s important to foster understanding and discussion, in a controlled environment.”

I nodded. “We’d be amenable to that idea, though any human candidates will carry emotional baggage after this attack. I’ll see what I can do to set that up.”

“Excellent. Take care, Meier, and let me know our hospital fleet’s status regularly.”

The Zurulian terminated the call, and I flopped down on a chair with exhaustion. Human participation in an exchange program shouldn’t be an issue, given how cute our helpers were. A few friends in the galaxy was a silver lining. The future ahead of us was going to be rife with war and suffering; we needed to maintain some positive relations to stay sane.

I fished out my holopad, and contemplated the address I was livestreaming tonight. My original speech was mired with blame and bitterness, focused on revenge. There was room for such sentiment, but that was also how the Arxur ended up with such a warped ideology. What humanity needed was hope.

The first words spilled from my fingers in a burst of inspiration.

To the people of planet Earth, who have been preyed upon by an unreasonable enemy. I know you are grieving the innocent blood that has been spilled this week. You feel hurt and anger, for the loved ones taken away too soon. I share every scrap of your pain.

What I want you to know is that humanity will endure, and that we are not alone. Not only do we have each other, but we have friends who stand with us. The Zurulians and the Venlil fought with us, and gave us back a sliver of optimism for a better life among the stars. It is time to unite with everyone who believes in our ideals; to stand as a single species with a single purpose.

Together, we will go for the Federation’s throat, relentless in the face of injustice. We will bring our enemies and our persecutors to their knees, if it takes millennia to rectify this vendetta. Humanity calls for atonement…for our right to exist. When we are done, the galaxy shall know what a hunter is.

My lips curved up with malice. The speech required some tweaking, but it carried the suitable degree of vengefulness. Governor Tarva would be relieved that I tempered the prior message down a notch.

If humanity could unify for the purpose of destruction, then the Federation would have a genuine reason to fear us. There would be

a reckoning for Earth, and I didn't know that their organization would survive it.

Chapter 55

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

Darkness had fallen over the reserve, when I peeked out from the tent. Sleep had instilled new energy in my veins. There was a slim hope of escaping Earth, if we could keep away from human search parties. Our posse needed to figure out our next move, and how to transport the predator kid without harming it.

A muffled whine echoed from behind me. I twisted around to see Arjun, bound in tight rope from head to toe. It must've woken before me, and been struggling to break free. Several layers of tape had been slapped over its mouth, wasting medical gauze. I assumed Zarn didn't want to hear a human speak.

Swallowing my nerves, I approached it. "Shh, it's okay. I'm going to have to rip the tape off. Close your eyes."

How could Doctor Zarn treat it like a thoughtless animal? Predators or not, humans were feeling sapients. The level of bindings was both excessive and unnecessary. Something as simple as tying a bell around its leg would suffice; it didn't seem fast or stealthy.

The predator child squeezed its eyes shut. I yanked the adhesive off as quickly as I could, and winced at the grimace on its features. The skin by its lip carried a red patch behind. The creature refrained from biting me with its slobbery canines, which was a relief.

I set to work untangling the series of knots. What happened if Arjun tried to take me by surprise, once it was loose? It could go for my gun before I knew what hit me. I was within grappling distance, and its reflexes must be quicker than mine.

The last of the rope came untangled, and the human wriggled out of its entrapments. My gaze drifted to my sidearm. I took a few steps back, and barely resisted the urge to draw a weapon. The kid had faced enough hardship these past few days; it needed someone to be civilized to it.

The watery look in its eyes…the poor thing is terrified. There's no question these wretches have feelings.

“I’m sorry that they did that to you, Arjun. Are you okay?” I asked gently.

It sniffled. “The only reason you’re not killing me is because you think they’ll trade resources for me. I heard how you talked about me.”

“That stopped Zarn and Jala from shooting you, didn’t it? I would’ve let you go. Trust me, I want to get you back to your family safely.”

“That’s bullshit! Those two aliens are evil. If you want me released, then help me get out of here!”

I was beginning to regret taking the tape off this thing’s mouth. That combative shouting wasn’t helping anyone. It needed to keep its voice down, or Zarn would realize I was trying to console a human. However, expecting an aggressive predator to keep its head was a bit overambitious. Holding this child to Krakotl sensibility standards would be unfair.

“I need the doctor cooperating.” My feathers puffed out with irritation. “My friend with the bandages will die without him. He’s a good person…smart, witty.”

The predator bared its teeth. “None of you are good people. You killed millions indiscriminately, and you *liked* it.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I had to choose between hundreds of civilizations and yours. It was a terrible decision, but a necessity for the continuance of life. Every step of the way, I tried to minimize human suffering.”

“By dropping bombs on cities? Do you hear yourself?”

“To the very last moment we approached Earth, I was trying to think of another way. My own crew hates that I treat your kind with dignity, and that I offer predators surrender.”

“Then your crew are assholes.”

Arjun’s voice sounded hoarse, and its lips looked dry. How had Zarn expected it to drink water with its mouth taped shut? The Takkan doctor hadn’t even left rations nearby. It probably would make that hateful “expert” giddy if it died of dehydration.

I fished through my own rations, making sure never to turn my back on the human. It would be foolish to leave myself vulnerable

to pouncing or strangulation. The child watched with interest as I procured a canteen. It gulped down a bit more than I'd like, before handing the canister back.

"Jala is the other Krakotl you saw. Her brain doesn't feel empathy or fear," I said. "She can't help that she's vicious, any more than you can."

In fact, Arjun is much more capable of compassion. It has tried to appeal to my morality several times. It cares for more than its own life.

The beast scowled. "Humans are not vicious. You're brainwashed, Kalsim! We have lives, families, schools…jokes, songs, and games, just like you."

"I am sorry for all the beauty you've lost, but that doesn't change the truth. Tell me that you can't see humans killing or enslaving weaker cultures. That you wouldn't happily take our worlds away, and reduce us to playthings."

"What? That's not our plan. We would never do that."

"Yet you've done these things to your own kind. And we are alien, not human. You'll build your empire off our backs, one way or another. It's in your DNA, passed from your ancestors to little ones like you. That…your growth is the threat."

Arjun clenched its fists in indignation, but was distracted by its stomach growling. Racking my brain, I tried to recall what Noah shared about human needs. The speaker claimed that their diet was primarily vegetation, and that they could live without meat. That meant this adolescent could consume our food without issue.

My talons retrieved a slab of dried tree bark. "Here. Stop arguing with me and eat this."

"Um, that doesn't look like my food." Arjun eyed the offering suspiciously. It took a hesitant nibble, then spit the bite out. "That is bitter…gross!"

"I'm giving you my rations so you don't starve. It doesn't have to taste like your delectable, blood-filled cuisine."

The kid made a disgusted face, but swallowed several bites. The gagging sound it made seemed rather dramatic. You'd think it was expelling its lungs, or that I had fed it a corrosive poison. This ruckus was going to ensure Zarn and Jala checked on us.

Few Krakotl would've gone out of their way to ensure a predator's welfare. Arjun didn't understand why its planet was attacked, but I didn't blame it for that. It was emotionally distressed, and unable to see these matters with objectivity. Maybe the youth would come to know that I protected it, in time.

The Takkan doctor sauntered in, wielding a pistol. "Good grief, Kalsim. You've let it loose, *and* you're feeding it?"

"Tree bark. We don't want it to lose its mind and gorge on Thyon's corpse," I said. "Speaking of which, where is the first officer?"

"Don't change the fucking subject. So now, instead of being bartered for supplies, this *human* is using up precious resources and manpower?"

"It's a temporary loss. We don't want to offer up the kid as a walking skeleton."

"Why the hell not? If you keep its stomach empty, the humans will be under more of a time constraint to get it back. That's assuming predators care at all."

Arjun shoved the last of the bark in its mouth, inching away from Zarn. Its cheeks were tear-stained, but absolute hatred shone in its pupils as well. I couldn't imagine how overwhelming the predatory chemicals flowing through its veins were. The doctor's lack of compassion was staggering; with how cold his suggestion of starvation was, you would think he had Jala's disorder.

I fixed the Takkan with a glare. "First off, we would encourage the humans to treat us the same in kind. This predator doesn't deserve to suffer for existing. It has suffered enough pain and heartache today."

The physician swished his tail. "You're oh-so-worried about its feigned emotions. Why do you care what it feels?"

"Fuck you! I'm not an it," the human growled.

Zarn charged the kid, rearing back with his firearm. The doctor trembled with anger, as he swung the gun toward its head. The predator's binocular gaze widened in alarm. I couldn't let it be beaten to a pulp for speaking its mind, when all it had done was complain about our language.

Arjun had a family and a future out there, which was jeopardized

by the Takkan's malice. The more I considered our conversation, its intelligence was impressive for a child. Granted, it would help propagate the survival of the human race. But that seemed a likely probability no matter what, so what did harming it achieve?

I don't want to see it in pain…or worse, end up like Thyon.

Without realizing I had moved, I stretched my wing in the strike's path. Zarn was committed to the blow by the time I obstructed his angle. The metal gun connected with my soft tissue, while the human cowered behind a feathery shield. Pain flared down my left appendage, resonating to the bone. The throbbing sensation was nauseating, and a single glance told me it was broken.

"Shit! You broke my wing," I screeched, doubling over in anguish. "What if that had been Arjun's head? You could've cracked his skull!"

The doctor leveled his gun barrel at me. "His?"

My eyes widened, as I realized my slip of the tongue. I shook my head, trying to filter away any positive assessments of Arjun. The kid was lying prone on the floor, and its eyes were bulging. If their tools and pack were taken away, humans weren't competent predators. I was the only one that could protect this beast.

Zarn's concentration waned, as a squawking Jala landed behind him. I took the opportunity to wrench the gun from his grip with my good wing. Ironically, I could use his services to patch the broken bone up. The pain intensified with the slightest movements or vibrations; the Takkan hadn't even flinched at assaulting me.

I brandished the firearm awkwardly. "Mutiny is punishable by death, unless the captain is deemed unfit for command. Why shouldn't I carry out your sentence?"

"Kalsim, p-put the gun down," the doctor stammered. "You're being unreasonable."

"I am unreasonable?! Then what on Nishtal do I call you?"

Jala issued a hearty laugh. "What did I miss?"

The female Krakotl's eyes darted behind him, and she drew her own firearm. Arjun had capitalized on the chaos, making a break for the exit. The human skidded to a halt, once the armed sociopath blocked its path. After witnessing how slippery Terran forces were, I

really should've been paying more attention to it.

I hope Jala doesn't make any hasty decisions here.

"Zarn proved himself a threat to crew safety and this mission." I lowered the pistol, and noted the contempt in the doctor's eyes. "But he's not going to disobey orders again, is he?"

The Takkan sighed. "No…sir."

"Your wing isn't supposed to bend like that, Kalsim," Jala chuckled.

I struggled to ignore the searing pain. "Tell me something I don't know…ah, go on, laugh at my misfortune later. Is there something you need?"

"I circled the perimeter from the skies, and spotted a human a few clicks away. It's heading toward our position…and it's armed."

Arjun mustered a feral snarl. "Dad."

Panic swelled in my chest, at the thought of Terrans converging on our position. Confronting Arjun's father was an option, but we didn't know that it was alone. The 'photographer' might notice that something was wrong, and alert authorities. Humans were dangerous without the element of surprise; it was unclear whether our small posse could survive direct combat.

It would be in our best interest to leave the kid, and that was what my conscience demanded. However, that plan wouldn't be popular with my companions. With a crippled wing, taking on Jala and Zarn was an incredible risk. Both could aim guns without difficulty, and a flightworthy Krakotl could maneuver freely.

More importantly, the doctor's incapacitation would damn Thyon. That was the main reason I couldn't punish this mutiny. The Farsul's life took precedence over Arjun's welfare, plain and simple. I had to keep this together until Thyon regained consciousness.

"It's time to move," I decided. "Where is your patient, Zarn?"

The doctor scowled. "Thyon is safe. Jala crafted a pulley system, and put him up in a nearby tree. Predators won't get to him there, though I can't speak for humans finding him."

"Good. We need to hurry, before dozens of full-grown beasts descend on us. We'll come back as soon as human activity cools off."

Jala began collecting our supplies, as well as anything Arjun had that was useful. I steered the kid out into the open, trying to be gentle with my gun prodding. Intimidating it wasn't my desire, but we needed to move quickly. There was no time for a diplomatic approach.

Arjun looked around in desperation, as we staggered out of the encampment. I knew it wanted to be rescued. That pleading gaze reminded me of the burning pups, praying to be saved from their extermination. Why did it have to jog up those memories, with every expression? I thought I was past that guilt.

"DAD! HELP!" the kid screamed. "They're—"

I clapped my good wing over its mouth. "You idiot! Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Zarn passed me a roll of medical gauze, a conceited glint in his eyes. I could hear the words 'told you so' from the smug doctor. He scowled at the human, tracing a toe over his own throat slowly. The child swallowed, and I suppose it understood the gesture.

I applied a single layer of tape, and offered a sympathetic pat. The predator hadn't left much choice other than to gag it. Not only could that wailing cry have alerted its father, but it could've drawn attention from forest beasts.

That squashed all hopes of Arjun's guardian accepting the disappearance as a tragic accident. Its suspicions were going to be elevated, and its protective instincts would seek answers. Our entourage was about to find out exactly how good humans were at tracking.

Chapter 56

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

The leafy ground crunched underfoot, as we steered the Terran prisoner across the park. I was certain Arjun was purposefully stomping on brittle patches. The kid wanted to make as much noise as possible, in an attempt to summon others of its kind.

It didn't matter how much of a ruckus it made, or if it dragged its feet. With how slow humans plodded along, we had at least an hour of walking between us and the returning father. It would tire after sustained exertion, and be forced to retrieve a vehicle to close that distance. That left time to snack and hydrate.

I ambled along on weary legs. "How do you land animals walk everywhere? I wish I still could fly, *Zarn*."

"And I wish I could exsanguinate that thing of yours. It would die in minutes if I sliced that big artery on its neck," the doctor muttered.

Jala chuckled. "Do you think its eyes would stay open after we axed its head? Or maybe they would…pop right out of its skull?"

"We're not killing it!" I snapped. "Life, even tainted life, is sacred. True exterminators do not kill for fun or for laughs."

Zarn pulled a scalpel from his bag, and inspected the reflective metal. The Takkan must be considering how it would slice through predator skin. I wondered why he hated humans, when his species' government voted to be their allies. What left him so certain that social hunters had no emotions or benefits?

I tried to focus on our travels, knowing we couldn't rest before Arjun's father did. The kid's skin was damp, but the strain to its breathing was minimal. We had been walking in the afternoon heat for an hour, and its legs weren't fully grown. It *should* be panting and stumbling with exhaustion.

What regiment has this human hatchling been through? Its little lungs must be on fire. We need to rest, for its sake, soon.

Additionally, there had been a surprising lack of predator sightings in the forest environment. Something must have picked up our

scent by now, but none of them had investigated further. Did other hunters fear the apex humans? The primates shouldn't scare wild beasts with their unimpressive forms.

"Mmm! Kmsm!" Arjun jerked backward, and howled against the tape. "Hmm!!"

I cursed as the kid clipped my broken wing. "Did I tell you to stop walking? Er, I mean, we'll rest in a few minutes…you're almost there."

It continued screaming beneath the gag, and its binocular eyes were almost hysterical. If something frightened a predator, that gave me pause. There must be a reason it refused to walk, unless this was a time-wasting trick. The fear looked strikingly real though, so I was inclined to believe the antics.

A blood-curdling hiss permeated the air, and movement flashed across the leafy ground. A brown creature uncoiled its scaly body, lifting its head toward us. A forked tongue waggled from its mouth like a seesaw. The way it slithered forward was alien and unnerving; there were no legs that I could see.

That's a prey animal…it has side-facing eyes, I decided. *The poor thing must be trying to scare off the predator, flattening its neck like that. I can't believe that works on a sapient human.*

The alarm in Arjun's gaze intensified, and beads of sweat surfaced on its skin. We would've stepped on the reptile, if the kid hadn't flailed about. Why was it so terrified of a crippled animal? The tiger's bite was much more petrifying than this thing.

The human seemed to forget about the gun to its back, and bolted away with impossible energy. That mad dash reminded me of Federation species in a mindless stampede. Maybe these frail primates incorporated some prey instincts into their hardware, to compensate for their weakness.

Jala lined up her gun barrel. "Better learn how to fly real quick, Arjun."

My eyes widened. "Don't shoot it!"

"You're no fun. I'm not just letting that scrawny beast go!"

The sociopath was airborne before I could stop her, and bore down on Arjun with powerful flaps. She swiped her talons across its

shoulder, carving twin gashes into its flesh. The human yelped. It lost its balance from the blow, and toppled to the ground.

Jala's takeoff aggravated the hissing animal, which hadn't blinked a single time. Shouldn't it calm down now that the predator was gone? Zarn seemed to feel bad for it, since the sight of Arjun had traumatized it. He wanted to show it we weren't like the humans.

The doctor reached out to give it a comforting pat. "Nobody's going to hunt you, sweetie. Did those nasty apes eat your babies? I—"

The panicked animal was still in fending-off-predators mode. It was worked up in a frenzy, desperate and aggressive to any movements. Zarn was oblivious to the opening of its mouth. It bit the doctor with tiny teeth, and he grabbed his arm in pain.

My gun was readied within a second, and I dispatched a shot through its head. I cursed the Takkan for making me shoot a non-sapient victim to Terran incursions. To make matters worse, any nearby humans would hear that reverberation.

"You had to try to touch a terrified, helpless prey animal," I sighed.

Zarn inspected the two tiny puncture marks. "I just wanted to soothe it, Kalsim. Let me disinfect the wound. Barely a scratch."

My pupils swiveled toward Arjun, who had ripped the tape off its own mouth. Jala was looming over it, and pecked at its earlobe to draw a reaction. I rushed over to intervene, pushing the female Krakotl away from the downed kid. My curiosity demanded an explanation for the freakout.

"That was irresponsible of you to run off. You startled that poor animal," I grumbled. "All that panic, for a rudimentary threat display?"

Arjun gawked at the marks on Zarn's gray skin. "The snake bit you? Listen Kalsim, if you don't get him to a human medic, he's going to die. Painfully."

"Die? I'm not falling for that," the doctor scoffed. "Our species actually knows how to treat infections."

"We have penicillin too, Doctor Psycho. Do you have no concept of venom? You're going to be paralyzed and unable to breathe…in an hour."

"It does burn quite a bit, Captain, but I have painkillers. Besides, if I

was actually poisoned, this human would want me to die and languish. That's all they're capable of wanting!"

My eyes narrowed, as Zarn confessed to localized pain. His arm did look rather swollen near the puncture wounds. Then again, a medical professional should recognize the signs of blood poisoning. I hoped he wouldn't brush off Arjun's warning just because a human passed it along.

We do need to keep moving, urgently. I'll monitor Zarn's symptoms, and if it gets worse, I'll figure something out.

"Let's get in a few more minutes of walking, and we'll settle down," I said. "We can disinfect your wound, and Arjun's…incisions."

The predator kid flexed its shoulder with a wince. The crimson blood staining its artificial pelt was drying. It pursed its lips like it wanted to argue, but I waved it along at gunpoint. The human shuffled ahead in silence, not wanting the tape reapplied.

The tree cover thinned out, and we pressed ahead for several monotonous minutes. I remained on the lookout for snakes, just in case. It didn't make sense why Arjun would help its tormentor. Also, if snakes were really that dangerous and frightening, why hadn't humans exterminated them?

Zarn sucked in a sharp breath, facial muscles contorting. His pace had begun to lag several steps behind ours. He touched the affected area with the other paw, and screamed in a high register. Tears trickled from his eyes.

"GAH! My b-blood is on fire," he squealed.

The Takkan slumped against the base of a tree, writhing in agony. Arjun's eyebrows twitched, as though it was in pain itself. Perhaps I had underestimated the scope of human empathy. The best we could hope for, after this failed mission, was that their murders were less sadistic than Arxur hunts.

"Make it stop!" Zarn shrieked.

Jala puffed out her feathers. "Shut up! You're giving away our location."

"It hurts so bad. HELP ME! It's like acid…it's…"

The female Krakotl retrieved the medical tape, and I slapped it out of her grip with the good wing. She wasn't going to shut Zarn up,

like an animal, while he was in anguish. Losing the doctor was unacceptable; his services were needed for a fine officer's survival.

Arjun knelt on its knee, and coaxed the Takkan into a prone position. I knew Zarn was out of it, when he didn't resist the beast's contact. The predator was remarkably gentle with its motions. It showed decency to an enemy that did not deserve it. Just like my officers said I had, where humans were involved.

I'm glad I treated their kind with respect. That I didn't make them suffer, and I didn't enjoy their deaths.

"Kalsim! We need to get help," Arjun pleaded.

The doctor's grip tightened around a grass clump. "Get lost, predator. You j-just want to watch my suffering up close. You're lapping it up…"

"I don't want to watch anyone die. You're the one who wanted to watch humans suffer up close."

"No. Wounded prey smells good, right? Wait to get your pickings until I'm dead."

"We never wanted to eat you. I'm a vegetarian! It's part of my religion…to show compassion for animals."

My eyes widened at its proclamation. The predator *had* to be joking. It was Federation religions that dictated that preying on animals was greedy, bloodthirsty, and evil. Natural-born hunters would never follow any ideology that demonized their own existence.

How did that make the slightest sense?

"I thought humans were interesting," Jala clicked. "But they're pathetic, just like everyone else. Cowering in the face of danger… religions about compassion…crying over people that are dead like it's *so sad*."

I glared at her. "As I've told you from the beginning, humans have selective empathy. Our knowledge of them is evolving, but their expansionism is incompatible with peace."

"Don't be fooled, Jala, they're b-brutal. Cunning and manipulative," Zarn gasped. "Their history…is one of conquest and invasions. Humans cook up new ways to kill each other…always."

The doctor howled through gritted teeth, as a spasm rippled down the afflicted limb. His pained cry morphed into a full-throated

scream. Arjun wordlessly poured some water on the Takkan's head, trying to cool his burning skin. Somehow, I trusted the predator not to finish him off; my attention shifted to finding an effective painkiller.

Before I realized what was happening, a deafening gunshot echoed behind me. Jala was hovering over Zarn, a crazed look in her eyes. The physician's body went slack, as blood gushed from his temple. The human gaped as the corpse brushed its leg.

I aimed my sidearm at the sociopath. "What did you do?! DROP YOUR WEAPON!"

"That's precisely how to shut someone up," she chirped. "Enough of your games, Kalsim. We do this my way now."

"Drop. The. GUN!!"

"C'mon, you hated Zarn. He was making too much noise; the predator said he was going to die anyway. Plus, you would've had us stay here and listen to him scream."

"This is your last warning."

"The *human* is slowing us down too, and it will actively work against us at every turn. I'm doing you a favor. Make your choice: me or Arjun."

Jala swiveled her pistol toward the predator kid, who seemed stunned by Zarn's death. Arjun had never seen a creature die in front of it, had it? The words it said about compassion for animals reminded me of my extermination philosophy. We both killed when it was necessary, and contained our damage to the rightful sources.

Against all odds, I appreciated this predator's way of life. It was honorable and empathetic enough, not yet lost to its destructive instincts. I had more in common with this prowler than Jala. There was some attachment to it…to him, in that I didn't want to watch him die in front of me.

I squeezed the trigger, and a succinct pop indicated a successful shot. Shock flashed in the sociopath's eyes, before her body crashed alongside Zarn's. The gun slipped from my grasp in a daze. Had I really just lost both able-bodied crew in the span of a minute?

Arjun scrambled to his feet, scooping up the weapon. He didn't point it at me, for some reason. Blue Takkan blood was spattered

alongside his own scarlet shade. The little predator flopped down beside the doctor's satchel.

"You're hurt. We need to t-treat your wounds, and find your father," I stammered.

The human didn't respond, and merely got to work patching up his own injuries. My instincts should've created an uproar, over my proximity to an armed predator. However, I couldn't process fear through the shock. This world of death and wilderness, Earth, could not be my reality.

I zoned out, staring into the distance. My story would come full circle, if it was ended by the predator I chose to spare. Quite a poetic conclusion…for turning my back on my occupation. The three Federation castaways could lie unburied, in this infested land, for all eternity.

Thyon is unconscious and abandoned, in this predatory hell. Snap out of it, Kalsim.

There was a slight cracking sound from above, which broke my trance. Before I could glance up, something rough brushed against my throat. The next thing I knew, rope cinched around my throat in a suffocating knot.

My body was yanked upward, and I found myself standing on empty space. I instinctively tried to loosen the noose, as my entire mass dangled in its secure embrace. My wings attempted to tread air; searing, all-encompassing pain lanced down the broken bone. Generating lift was impossible.

"Son!" a thunderous voice barked from above. "Get out of here, and call for help. MARCOS is looking for these fuckers."

How had Arjun's father gotten here so soon? There was no way a human predator could've closed the distance without running. But running that long was impossible, unless their endurance was nigh divine. The kid hadn't tired at all either…oh, sweet Inatala.

Arjun palmed his black hair. "Tell me you regret what your species did, Kalsim. Please."

"Regret? Sure…I always did," I croaked. "But it…was the only way. To secure a future. I did my d-duty."

The human youngling watched as my oxygen supply dissipated. His

vicious eyes watered. I knew he was thinking about Bengaluru, contemplating how my orders leveled dozens of cities like it. The poor thing never understood the bleak necessity.

A constricting pain centered around my larynx, and my field of vision began to diminish. Awareness was receding, like sinking into a vast ocean. Struggling didn't seem important anymore. I felt like I lived a good life, a meaningful one…

"Cut Kalsim down, Dad, please!" Arjun's voice sounded as though it came from underwater. "He saved my life from the other two, multiple times. I don't want him killed."

The adult human growled a reply I didn't register. Its voice was charged with bellowing savagery, a preview of what Arjun would sound like at full maturity. I didn't want to see him transform into an unstable beast, constantly beleaguered by the need to chase. That sickening development was the reason why pups were supposed to be exterminated.

The kid offered a plea that was incoherent, as my eyes fluttered shut with grim realization. The rope released its grip, and I plummeted back to the earth with a muted sensation. The little predator poked at my beak, but I couldn't move a muscle.

The world faded away, leaving me helpless at the paws of the warlike monsters.

Chapter 57

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

Marcel leaned over the destroyer's railing, allowing the saltwater to splash his face. The predator's eyes stared where the towering skyline of New York City had once been. His loved ones were in one of the nearby bunkers, perhaps buried beneath a mountain of rubble. The human resolved to search for Nulia and Lucy, but I feared his reaction if they weren't found alive.

The American military sent most available service members to the remnants of its largest city, once the environment was deemed safe. Rescue prospects weren't promising for the main hubs, so efforts would be focused on the city outskirts. With the traditional naval ports and space docking sites pulverized, the boat would allow alien visitors to touch down.

My skin crawled at the thought of the Arxur landing on Earth. I remembered what the grays had done on the bombed-out cradle; it terrified me that they might get a taste for human flesh. What if the survivors, like Marcel, were rounded up onto a cattle ship? The thought of him being caged or tortured again filled me with despair.

Minutes from now, those monsters were going to be walking onto this very deck. I couldn't stop focusing on that image; every instinct compelled me to hurl myself overboard. The Terrans were in no condition to protect me. I didn't believe for a second that those emotionless predators were genuinely here to help.

The red-haired human studied his reflection in the water. "Shit. Do you remember the first time we chatted online, Slanek?"

"You said, 'Hello.' I sat at my keyboard for two hours, trying to envision your true intent," I muttered. "I was terrified to talk to a predator."

"Wait, that's why you didn't answer right away? I mean, I was nervous too, but more about fucking up first contact."

"Marc, all I could think was, what have I done? After several bouts of crying, multiple drafted messages to Republic emergency services

to drop out of the program…"

"You asked me, with no context or greeting, what I saw when I looked in the mirror."

Marcel didn't finish the anecdote, instead tilting his head in consideration. At the time, the human answered, *A mouth, a nose, two eyes and ears. I'd be concerned if that changed.* The horrors of my imagination evaporated with laughter. I felt guilty that I had been so preoccupied with his appearance in the beginning.

The worry creases on his forehead aged him by a decade, as did the blemish of the scars on his cheek. By comparison, my friend's paralyzing gaze had been full of life, with that snarl he couldn't contain. I wanted to remember the humans as that optimistic race; affectionate and carefree. Whatever compromises our beloved predators had to make, I wouldn't let them change my perspective.

"I see a survivor." Swallowing my nerves, I propped myself over the railing. My gray fur was a matted mess, and my slender ears were pinned in terror. "T-two of them, actually. Please, don't let the Arxur eat me."

He ruffled the stray tuft on my head. "I'm scared too, buddy. I have nightmares about them eating that immobilized Gojid…then, eating you or Nulia. Is it wrong to admit that?"

"No. Your f-feelings are important too. You're just really good at acting strong."

"Key word, acting."

An angular craft rocketed down from the cloud cover, and I squeezed my tail around the human's wrist. The curvature of the ship's belly suggested it was stocked with missiles; it was brimming with weaponry from every angle. The engine roared as it completed its atmospheric descent, following the Terran glide slope. The Arxur vessel slammed onto the open deck, and our personnel eyed it warily.

There's a human sniper watching them from the mast. I wonder if the grays noticed…better hope my friends can react quicker than those demons can snap me in half.

Paralyzing terror coursed through my bloodstream, as dozens of Arxur lumbered out into the open. They lugged some supply crates onto the deck, and waved for the humans to collect them. Terran

personnel scurried over to sort through the offerings. I could see in the primates' eyes that they were concerned about opening up a cattle 'gift.'

One Arxur was directing the others, with the cracked skin around its eyes suggesting its age. Its nostrils flared with obvious hunger, entranced by the whiff of Venlil in the breeze. Ghastly reptilian eyes snapped my way, and yellowed teeth flared in a ferocious snarl. Why had Marcel's benign canines ever frightened me?

The enemy commander began ambling toward us. It leaned forward as it walked, poised to drop into a primal lunge in a heartbeat. Its pupils were darker than the frigid side of Venlil Prime, and its drab scales glistened like obsidian. I could see the saliva coagulating around its lips.

"It's okay, Slanek. I'm right here," Marcel growled.

My heart hammered so furiously that I swayed on my feet; the human caught me with steady hands. All thoughts were shutting down, like a hard reset to the noggin. Every conscious impulse screamed to propel myself into the ocean, but my brain signals weren't registering.

I sank my claws into the human's forearm, whimpering like wounded prey. Tears flowed down my face, dripping onto his pale skin. Marcel massaged my scruff, and tried to stop me from shaking uncontrollably. His gentle touch wasn't enough to counter an Arxur, standing right across from me.

How could we have ever considered such an abomination sapient? It was the spitting image of death itself. Nothing motivated it, other than its appetite and its cruelty.

"Greetings. I'm going to assume you're in charge, since you have a Venlil…attached." The Arxur's warm breath hit me on the cheek, as it spoke in a reverberating roar. "My name is Chief Hunter Isif. We understand this was the United Nations headquarters, so I decided to accompany this landing party."

Marcel cleared his throat. "What can I do for you?"

A faint sliver of awareness crept back in. I didn't understand why my human wouldn't point this monster toward the actual officers… and far away from us. I wanted to study the vegetarian's expression, but I couldn't turn my eyes away from the Arxur. It hadn't stopped

staring at me from the moment it approached.

“Requesting permission to set up emergency housing. I can have structures and basic amenities organized in a day,” Isif barked.

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue,” the red-haired human said. “If you’re aiding search-and-rescue, would you come with me to a neighborhood called Midwood? The people in those bunkers are a UN priority.”

“Gladly. I’ll pick several of my finest to accompany you.”

“Oh, and tell your soldiers not to *desecrate* any human bodies.”

“Cut it out. We don’t eat each other, whatever the Federation told you. So why would any of us want to eat humans?”

The chief hunter’s eyes lingered on me, the actualization of every nightmare I ever had. My spine pressed back against Marcel’s chest, using his muscular form for support. Every muscle in my body felt weak as jelly, and my nerves were overstimulated beyond salvaging. I wanted to crawl under a rock, and never show my face again.

The Arxur sighed, slinking off with a swish of its tail. It conversed with some Terran personnel for a moment, then issued emphatic orders. Several grays filed into a human “helicopter”, a strange aircraft that had twin blades on its roof. The racket stung my ears, as the propeller revved to life.

“Okay. I don’t expect you to come with me, Slanek.” Marcel released a forceful exhale, and set me back on my paws. “But getting to my family can’t wait…I have to know.”

“So you’re hitching a ride with the *child-eating predators*?! What will Nulia think if she is alive?” I spat. “You just said you have nightmares about those things devouring her.”

“Using the Arxur will get me there quickest. I’m sorry. There’s no line I won’t cross…I have nothing to live for without them.”

“What about me? I care about you. After what we’ve been through together—”

“Don’t make this about you, buddy. I get why Sovlin losing his family broke him now. If they’re dead, so am I.”

“Marcel, p-please—”

“Go home, Slanek. I hope you succeed in all your future aspirations. Thank you for giving a predator like me a chance.”

The red-haired human shouldered his rifle and duffel bag, and limped over to the waiting helicopter. Those hazel eyes never so much as glanced back; his slender fingers were curled into a fist. Recollections of my predator, starving and beaten, darted through my mind. I could see those same hands pressed up against the glass, as he reached out with the last of his strength.

Marcel tried to protect me in his final moments too, through unimaginable pain. I can’t let him throw his life away.

I remembered how helpless I felt, watching the vegetarian held at gunpoint. The pain in his eyes had been like glass shards in my heart. The thought of never speaking to him again, and learning that the Arxur chopped him up into little pieces…it filled me with the same despair.

How did my Terran friend expect me to abandon him to a senseless fate? Riding along on this suicide misadventure was out of the question though. Marcel wasn’t engaged in proper thinking right now; he needed someone to drill some sense into him. Humans were significantly weaker than the Arxur, so he’d be helpless when they ambushed him.

“Damn you!” I scampered after the hobbling human, who was only a few paces from the chopper. “I nursed you back from death’s door, went with you to a Gojid warzone, and stayed here when we all thought your Earth was going to be glassed to the core!”

Marcel clambered up into the chopper. “You’ve done enough. Go away, Slanek; get lost.”

“And go home, like none of this happened? I’m telling you, as your friend, not to do this. I need you safe and alive, and I don’t care if that’s ‘making this about me.’”

I bounded the last several steps, and hurled myself at the human’s leg in desperation. My hindlegs scrabbled for traction on the floor; I struggled with all my might to pull the bulky predator off the helicopter. Marcel panted, and shook me off with a grunt. The Arxur passengers watched with amusement.

The human set his supplies on an empty seat, adjacent to the cockpit. Chief Hunter Isif was ordering the Terran pilot he’d

borrowed to take off. I had to get my friend out of here now.

With panicked desperation, I yanked at his injured arm. Marcel could forgive me for the pain that caused later. It was the only way to mitigate his superior strength, and save him from his own recklessness.

“Shit!” he cursed. “*Get the fuck off of me.*”

The vegetarian’s eyes dilated with frustration, and his cheeks turned that flushed shade of red that unnerved me. His teeth bared with obvious hostility; that was no human smile causing his jaw to tremble. I wasn’t about to be scared away by growling, even if it made my throat go dry. He was never going to hurt me.

Marcel pried my claws off of him with predatory strength; his typical gentleness was gone. I mewled in protest, but the human clenched his fingers into my scruff. He carried me toward the exit in cold silence, and seemed ready to toss me outside. My legs flailed about in desperation, but the struggling didn’t have much effect.

The helicopter rose the first few feet off the ground. Chief Hunter Isif retreated from the cockpit, and darted between Marcel and the exit. The Arxur commander slid the door shut, sealing off the escape route for both of us. Its eyes widened in confusion, as it noticed me dangling like a pup from the human’s hands.

“Take a seat. There’s room for you and the animal,” it snarled. “Per the map overlay, this should be a short ride.”

The aircraft was ascending rapidly, now above the mast in altitude. My heart sank in my chest, compounded by sheer panic. Jumping from this height would be suicide, though it might be better than being turned into cattle. Not only had I failed to get Marcel away from these monsters, but I had ended up escapeless with him.

The red-haired human adjusted his grip, bringing me into the normal carrying position. I burrowed my head against his shirt, and he patted me with a sigh. Isif watched with keen interest, as the Terran settled in to his chosen seat. The vegetarian placed my shaking body on his lap, and turned my chin toward the window with a delicate push.

I was certain the other Arxur were gaping at us, and salivating at the flesh on my skeleton. My hope was that my presence would stop the grays from eating Marcel; Venlil were a juicier target, after all.

That didn’t lessen the dread in my heart. There was nothing worse than being trapped, hundreds of feet above the ground, with feral carnivores.

Chapter 58

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: October 18, 2136

The tension was palpable, as the Arxur occupants studied Marcel in silence. I gathered that the human didn't want to engage with them either. The predatory savagery from the cradle plagued my recollection, and the chilling screams of the unfortunate Gojids echoed on loop. It would be all too easy for the grays to gut either of us, with the swipe of their fangs.

Chief Hunter Isif dropped into the seat right next to us; the monster was inches away from me. It disregarded the shift in Marcel's body language. The human had leaned away, though there wasn't anywhere to go in a helicopter cabin. I got the impression his concern was for me, rather than himself.

After the attack on Earth, it's like he doesn't care what happens to him. If I wasn't about to be carved up, I'd insist he seek help.

Isif bared its teeth ferociously. "Well, I've introduced myself. What's your name, Venlil?"

Its voice was a discordant snarl, amplifying humanity's typical rumble by a thousandfold. A pathetic squeak escaped my throat, and I sobbed into Marcel's shirt. The vegetarian stroked my ear with patience, unfazed by the salty wetness soaking the fabric.

I didn't know how even a persistence predator could be so calm in the face of such an eyesore. That scaly demon was sensory hell. I'd rather be hunted by Marcel's kind for hours, than look at Isif for another second.

"Okay. That was the response I expected," the Arxur sighed. "What are you called, human?"

My human stiffened. "Marcel Fraser, but just Marcel is fine. The Venlil here, his name is Slanek."

"I *knew* you hadn't lost your voice, Marcel. Slanek is here on Tarva's behalf, yes?"

My ears perked up in alarm. How did Isif even know that name?! That must mean the Arxur were targeting the governor, or had other nefarious plans for her. I refused to believe the humans would

betray us by turning over intel on the Republic.

Marcel offered a curt head shake. “Slanek is a fighter pilot. We’re training him to be a proper soldier.”

“Ha! Good one…as if this specimen could fight.” Isif’s eyes glittered with decadent mirth, before the expression dissolved. “Oh Prophet. You’re serious, aren’t you?”

The red-haired human glared at the floor, not answering the reptile. It was clear my friend had little interest in the conversation; I think he only entertained the first question to get the commander to leave me alone. The monstrous predator gave up, and turned its focus to the window.

Our helicopter drifted above a sea of rubble, which stretched to the horizon. Building husks lingered as statues to a fallen world, and fires were splashed across the landscape. The ground was covered in a thick coating of soot; this looked like the aftermath of an Arxur raid. My heart sank in my chest, as I realized how dire the outlook was for Marcel’s family.

The human pilot guided our craft toward the designated neighborhood. Chief Hunter Isif craned its neck, and narrowed its disgusting eyes with solemnness. I didn’t understand what game it was playing, trying to make nice with the humans. It must have some dastardly plan at work.

The Arxur commander maintained the brooding expression, as we touched down. It ordered the other grays to sweep the area for survivors, and accrue intel for their government. Marcel rose to his feet to follow them, but Isif blocked the human’s path. The scaly monster gestured to the devastation behind it.

“What do you think of what the Federation did, Slanek?” the Chief Hunter growled.

My ears laid flat against my skull. “I t-think… it looks a lot like what you do.”

A sharp glint flashed in its eyes. “Ah, that’s a good answer. You think our species is an instrument of evil, yet you admit your friends are no different.”

“The F-federation are…monsters. Not friends. But they don’t eat people.”

“Because they don’t have to. You all want my kind wiped from existence. Hell, you probably wish I’d drop dead right now. Do you even see us as people?”

“After everything you’ve done, you’ll never be people, to anyone!”

My sudden outburst took me by surprise. Marcel‘s fingers tensed around my scruff, and his stance shifted to a defensive posture. That commentary placed my human in a precarious situation. My money wasn’t on the wounded, squishy primate if this turned physical. I should’ve never boarded this aircraft to begin with.

The Arxur raised the ridges above its eyes, and turned around with a sigh. Isif somehow restrained its aggression; the pointed huff emanated disappointment. It drew its sidearm, before shuffling into the ruins of New York.

Marcel followed with a bit of hesitancy. “I’m sorry for what Slanek said, Chief Hunter. Any sapient is a person, no matter what they’ve done.”

“Is that so, human?” the reptile grumbled. “Look, our race has become a shell of itself over the centuries. I wish it wasn’t like this.”

My eyes widened in surprise. Polite concessions, lamenting their current status, wasn’t what I expected it to say. For an emotionless predator, it was doing an excellent job at emulating regret. The fear eased enough for me to wonder what it had to gain from this act. The Arxur never attempted to converse with prey, as a rule.

“Why are you so cruel and merciless?” The words spewed from my mouth in a rambling fervor. “Why did you kill my brother, and bomb my planet, and eat people alive while they were running…”

Its nostrils flared. “Ah yes, it’s well-documented that I did all those things personally. I’m a busy guy, I get around.”

“Your species! D-don’t mock me, demon. There’s no good reason your breed are that cruel and morally deficient.”

“The Federation are the reason we’re starving. Cruelty was and is a defense mechanism, in my view. I’m not excusing it; I’m answering your insults.”

“*Defense mechanism.* How so?!”

“It was needed as a way to cope with what we had to do to survive. We’re also fighting a war of extinction, while vastly outnumbered,

so it serves psychological purposes to…encourage recorded sadism. The Federation loses because they're afraid."

The Arxur crested a mountain of rubble, and Marcel escorted us atop the debris too. One human was crawling through the street, with serious burns across her extremities. Her breathing came in ragged gasps, and the sight of peeling flesh made me wince.

Two Zurulian medics had arrived on the scene already; the Americans must've directed them to a separate landing site from the grays. A young volunteer rushed to the burn victim's side, repeating soothing words. The other quadruped kept a wide berth from the aggrieved human, and trembled in terror.

"Wilen, I need a dose of painkillers and antiseptics now," the youthful Zurulian chimed in.

Wilen flicked his ears in skepticism. "We know nothing about these predators, other than that the *Arxur* like them. Our government has gone mad, Fraysa. I can't get close to this thing!"

Isif's scowl intensified. The hunter gripped its sidearm with malicious intent. Rich hunger danced in its gaze, and it shared an enraged glance with Marcel. For once, I agreed with the monster; we couldn't let the medics dilly dally with an agonized human.

Fraysa rounded on her partner. "What we know, is the humans haven't done *anything* wrong. They sought peace, and were brutally attacked for it. Also, the Venlil and our ambassador adore them."

"But they're predators! I'm here for the Venl—"

"No! We don't play god, and pick and choose who we help. We save lives indiscriminately. Get with that, or get the fuck out of my sight."

The injured human watched with glassy eyes. Wilen lowered his head, before crouching at Fraysa's side. He began applying wet dressings and antiseptics, while his partner tended to the pain. The Zurulians then prepped a transport to their hospital ship.

Isif lowered its gun, and watched as the quadrupeds strained to lift the human. The Arxur marched down to the site, swishing its tail in a display of dominance. The Zurulians dropped the patient, when they saw the gray skulking toward them. I was worried the abomination had regained its appetite too.

Maybe it likes charred flesh, like Tyler did. It could see the Terran burn victim as the perfect meal…oh stars.

The Chief Hunter lifted the primate onto the gurney, and fastened the straps in seconds. It backed away, and growled to get the medics' attention. Fraysa was wielding a syringe in her mouth, pointing it as if a shot of painkillers would stop the murderous demon.

"Stay back!" The female Zurulian quivered, and seemed aghast at the sight of my human behind the gray. "Human…and Venlil, please! Help us! It's kidnapping my patient."

"I'm not kidnapping the human. I put her on the stretcher so you can move her for evac," Isif growled. "If I was hostile, trust me, you would know. I'm subtle as a sledgehammer."

Marcel trundled up beside the Arxur. "The last Federation physician I met wanted me dissected. Our doctors pledge to do no harm. It's a relief to see someone mirror the sentiment of the Hippocratic Oath."

Wilen squinted at the vegetarian. "You're…that human named Marcel, from Noah's video. I recognize you."

"Shit," Fraysa squeaked. "I'm sorry for what they did to you. Your treatment w-went against every, um, ethical principle…that we stand for."

The Chief Hunter inspected the red-haired human with confused eyes. The demonic predator mouthed the name 'Noah' to itself, and noted something on its holopad. I think it wanted to ask what happened to my friend. Obviously, a feral animal that loathed weakness would mock his traumatic experience.

Marcel pointed a hand to the stretcher; the Zurulians sidled up to the patient hesitantly. Isif slunk beside them, moving the brunt of the weight. The medics shuffled in a terrified stupor, and our oddball group traversed the ruins. It was sad to see Earth like this, having witnessed this city in its sprawling glory days ago.

It took several minutes to reach the Zurulian hospital ship, which was hovering over a decimated roadway. We glimpsed rows of beds in its loading bay, and my human's eyes widened with hope. Panicked shouts echoed from the ship's occupants at the reptile sighting. The Chief Hunter ducked its head, perhaps to seem less threatening.

The Arxur pulled away, and more Zurulian medics hurried over to lug the patient onboard. Fraysa and Wilen bore delirious eyes, which suggested the fear was overstimulating them. That little excursion must have been psychological torment to them.

“Have you rescued a Gojid child…hopefully with a human female?” my human growled.

Wilen blinked. “What?”

“A Gojid! You know, spiky, brown-furred, big claws. WHERE IS SHE?!”

The Zurulians cowered at Marcel’s roar, and their hackle fur stood on end. I swatted my tail at his chin, warning him to calm down. His desperation was something I recognized, but these medics didn’t understand humans yet. They probably thought he was about to go on a rampage.

“Marc is very upset…and loud, but he’s harmless,” I hissed. “Please, just tell us if you’ve seen a Gojid.”

Fraysa drew a shaky breath. “No. Only humans here.”

“I can check with our groups in the other cities,” Wilen added hurriedly. “Maybe Berlin, Toronto, Bangkok, or Manila? B-big predator dwellings there.”

Marcel slumped his shoulders in defeat. “No. They were here.”

“They? Oh…I see.” Understanding flashed in Isif’s pupils. “Why don’t we search for your packmates at their last location? These Zurulians could help us look around.”

The human nodded, blinking away tears. The Arxur focused on his watery eyes, and gave him a rough tail slap on the arm. If I didn’t know better, I would think it was a poor attempt at comfort. A species devoid of empathy was mimicking the trait, of course. Isif was clearly awkward and unpracticed at that falsified aspect.

Fraysa’s gaze softened, and she shared a glance with her partner. “We’ll help you search.”

“But I’d prepare for the likeliest possibility. As a predator, you should be logical about the situation,” Wilen said.

“Wilen, he clearly grasps the extent of the dead! There’s nothing logical about this. Where are we going, Marcel?”

The red-haired primate browsed his holopad, and searched for a location via GPS. The local terrain was unrecognizable, so I doubted he could distinguish Nulia's bunker from any other scrap heap. The device pinpointed a location a quarter-mile from the hospital ship. All I could see there was a thick hill of concrete.

Anything living must be crushed beneath that. It's likely the bunker collapsed from the pressure.

Marcel could barely put pressure on his injured leg, but he staggered ahead for the minutes-long trek. I could feel the human's grief expanding with every step; my predator was cracking right alongside the buildings of New York. It hurt to see my friend, who I believed could withstand any emotion, crumbling. His distress frightened me as much as the hideous Arxur flanking us.

Marcel reached the selected debris mound, and I dismounted onto my own paws. This must be the fallout shelter his family relocated to. The human hurled himself on all fours, flinging the smallest rocks behind him in a frenzy. An animalistic grunt reverberated from his chest, as he strained against his arm injury to tug a massive rock chunk.

Chief Hunter Isif pressed its shoulder against the debris, and moved it enough to leave a tiny gap. Marcel pawed at the scraps below, trying to catch a glimpse of the shelter. He dug furiously with his flimsy fingers. Blood streamed from his dust-caked nails, but that only quickened his scrabbling.

"LUCY! NULIA!" he wailed, in the highest-pitched voice I'd heard him use.

There was no reply from beneath the ruins. Through choking sobs, my friend returned to parsing rocks with his hands. His fingers were drenched in crimson fluid. Sympathy clasped my heart with a vice-like grip, and I tackled him in a desperate hug.

"Marc, stop it. You're hurting yourself," I pleaded.

Fraysa placed a cautious paw on his neck. "That's enough. We'll excavate the bodies, and make sure they get a proper burial by your customs. I promise."

The human collapsed atop the wreckage, and pressed an eye against the opening. He screamed incoherently, punching the rubble in outrage. I watched the life leave his sweet countenance; even the

gushing tears dried up. My friend was unresponsive to any prodding.

Wilen dabbed at his eyes, affected by the extent of the predator's raw emotions. I recognized that realization, as he decided humans were sapient. Anyone who saw this display as a performance had to be heartless. There must be countless others across Earth in such a state.

I nuzzled his leg. "Step aside and rest, please. Let the doctors disinfect your wounds."

"Why?!" my human croaked. "They've taken *everything*. Oh Slanek, put me out of my mis—"

"Mawsle!!" a childish voice cried, faintly audible. "Where have you been? It's really dark down here, and I don't like the dark."

Marcel's head snapped up. "You're…alive? I'm coming, darling. Just hold on! We're working as fast as we can."

"But I want to go somewhere safe now! Somewhere monsters won't find me or pick on your eyes. Don't leave me here, Mawzy!"

"Never. I'm right here."

A chorus of human growls joined Nulia, as they realized rescuers were above. Relief coursed through my veins; against all odds, some of the bunker withstood the blast. Chief Hunter Isif radioed to send heavy machinery to our coordinates, and withdrew with a fierce snarl. Untrustworthy as it was, I couldn't deny it'd been helpful so far.

Amidst the chaos and devastation on Earth, it was a relief to save a few human lives from the ashes.

Chapter 59

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 20, 2136

The United Nations had only scratched the surface of species in the Federation, having meaningful interactions with a small percentage. The Krakotl and Farsul received the most fanfare in the anti-predator coalition, but 24 total species had participated in Earth's attack. Of those, 17 committed only a minority of their forces.

One of those was the Harchen, a reptile species famed for their natural camouflage. The waddling prey bipeds were half a human's height, and could morph their skin into a multitude of alluring colors. Their species was a stellar average in most fields, notable for a few media franchises and software start-ups. Thus, all they had in common with the Arxur was animal class.

My decision to wander into Harchen territory looked dicey though, in an obvious Venlil ship. Given their hostile relations with Earth, I doubted they'd welcome us with open arms. That was why I weaponized the humans' stealth tactics to remain hidden. Their cunning strategies, deployed against Gojid border outposts long ago, had become useful in ironic fashion.

Our ship leapt between high-gravity spots, until we lurked behind a satellite of the *Blissful Modernity*. It was a wealthy colony which housed media conglomerates and tech companies. Most importantly, it was the home of an investigative reporter I wanted to recruit. Her stories were hard-hitting, and she was steadfast to the facts; whatever they may be.

"Why are we here, Sovlin?" The deaf Talpin demanded through his synthesizer. "You are escaping with the Harchen, a Terran enemy. You still want to kill the humans for being predators?"

Berna, his sister, flicked her claws. "Countless people died on Earth, you monster. How can you turn your back on them?"

"I'm going to pick up a journalist named Cilany, who I trust, in the shuttle," I replied. "You're going to wait here, where no one can see you. In and out, then we head to Aafa."

“This ‘Cilany’ must have an interest in protecting her planet. Her species is *hostile* to the humans,” the female Gojid returned. “There are other journalists in the galaxy…hell, thousands on Aafa. We don’t need an enemy.”

“The media figures who can be impartial to humans are few. Cilany’s the one who exposed the Sivkits for turning away millions of refugees a year, and dissected their unsustainable colonizing practices. Though, it was outing the Krakotl military for prolific extortion that got her famous.”

“How does *any* of that connect her to you?”

“Because I was the anonymous source for both stories.”

Gunboat diplomacy wouldn’t retrieve intelligence, whatever my UN guards had thought. Berna and Talpin objected to my plan, but they were missing the big picture of our Kolshian excursion. Mouthpieces were little good without the means to spread their message around. Besides, investigating the Federation was something that mandated professional assistance.

Sensors indicated a large ship presence around the *Blissful Modernity*, perhaps the Harchen anticipating a human counterattack. Scanning for subspace readings or life signs wasn’t an option in our precarious stealth mode; the situation would be clearer once I got a visual. The escape pod was cramped on the inside, but I wriggled through the emergency hatch nonetheless. My hope was that this Venlil-sized four-seater would escape detection.

Here you go, Sovlin. Fly through a waiting armada…and then, you have to get back up here too. This was a remarkably bad idea.

My surroundings became visible on the viewport, as I coasted out from behind a solar station. The Harchen colony glistened a dusty brown, and lacked any signs of native vegetation. Hundreds of warships were centered around the planet, which set alarm bells off in my head. The prey reptiles never had this many heavy craft on stand-by, for a minor colony.

After fiddling with the buttons, I magnified an orbiting warship on screen. The breath was sucked from my lungs. That clunky, explosive-laden death machine was an Arxur bomber, and it was surrounded by many brethren. It wasn’t being challenged by any Harchen vessels, despite the fact that most of their fleet stayed at

home.

Had the Harchen's involvement in the attack on Earth left their colonies vulnerable? Perhaps they had to ration their defenses to the most populated areas without complete numbers. It was also possible local coordination was too poor to resist a full-fledged assault. Regardless, something must've caught the grays' eyes.

The emergency channel crackled to life, when I switched on the radio. "Requesting immediate assistance from any Harchen vessels in the vicinity. Harchen Command…do you copy? Our evacuation ships are being slaughtered!"

There was a brief pause, before a terse reply came through. "We can't divert assets from Fahl. The Arxur are trying to lure us away from the homeworld, since their head-on approach failed. I'm sorry."

"B-but you can't just leave us here! Send a few ships to cover evacuation, please!"

"*Blissful Modernity*, you're not the priority. I suggest you broadcast the Chant of Remembrance planetwide, to secure your passage to the afterlife. Good luck."

The Chant of Remembrance was a traditional folk-song that the Harchen used as a last rite. That was one way of saying that the entire colony was going to be sacrificed. If I attempted to land on the surface, I might get blown out of the sky, or gunned down on foot by the Arxur. Worse yet, I could be herded onto a cattle ship.

Overall, this was becoming a worse idea by the second. Berna and Talpin could be spotted in the main ship at any moment, or be left without a pilot to complete the journey. The humans needed our testimony to reach the Federation. The fate of the galaxy hinged on the reception of my plea.

But if I was ever a good captain, I had to try to rescue an old friend from the Arxur incursion. What kind of man stood idly by as innocent civilians were butchered? The Harchen people didn't deserve this, however complicit their government was in Earth's bombing. I wondered if the Terrans still understood that.

"You just land by the *Blissful Network's* office, run in, rescue Cilany, and take off," I told myself. "This will be fine. Nobody will notice a tiny escape pod amidst an orbital bombardment."

I plotted a descent course for the address. My shuttle snuck past the grays, as they focused on decimating the landmass. Arxur looked for visuals of escape craft from the surface, not suicidal rescuers. They probably relied on sensor data too. Our stealthy approach gave me a chance to land, but the return trip was another matter.

The shuttle blazed into the thin atmosphere, rattling from the external force. Fiery missiles streaked down alongside me. They were a relentless barrage meant to inflict high casualties. The people on the ground knew that it was raining death, and their escape chances were close to none.

Would the humans come to the rescue, if they were here? I asked myself. *Samantha spoke like she wanted this to happen, but I can't believe she truly meant that "purge" line.*

The Harchen ground enlarged on the screen, with a smoky mist fogging the air. Precise explosions targeted a few city blocks, smiting residential areas and infrastructure. The Arxur wanted to flush any civilians from their homes, so the cattle collectors would have an easy time. It was a page out of a playbook we'd seen many times.

"Landing complete. Initiating shutdown sequence," my pod's computer announced.

I scrambled out of the shuttle, gun in paws. The polluted oxygen sent me into a coughing fit, and my eyes watered. Mushroom clouds dotted the horizon like treetops. The sole relief was that there were no lanky Arxur silhouettes in the vicinity, although I could hear gruesome screams in the distance.

The press building was still intact, and that was a positive sign in itself. Stampeding wasn't a viable instinct, when bombs were going off on every corner. The 'runners' were likely half-eaten corpses by now, but some people must've sheltered in place. I had to hope my reporter friend was one of them.

Autopilot kicked in, as I sprinted up the emergency stairwell. There were no signs of footsteps, electricity, or chatter. My prayer was that the Arxur hadn't swept this building already. I doubled over, once I stumbled onto the third floor; the steep ascent left me winded.

Terrified screams followed my entry. "DON'T EAT US! We're r-

reptiles like…oh."

Cilany gasped. "Sovlin? What the hell are you doing here?"

My gaze swept the room. There were four Harchen reporters hiding under desks, quivering in terror. One was holding a seat cushion over his throat, as if that would protect him from an Arxur's teeth. I relaxed my gun, and gestured toward the stairwell door.

"No time. Come with me…I parked a shuttle outside. You can all fit if you squeeze together," I growled.

Cilany blinked in confusion. "Not so fast. We've heard you're a human prisoner, and that you were mentally unstable before. Why and *how* are you here? I won't be a predator's test subject."

"The humans sent me to Aafa as a messenger, and you can see I'm in good condition. I need your help. You'll have every opportunity to stay with the Kolshians."

"Prove you're not re-educated, Sovlin. They could've turned you into a mindless minion. Doing their bidding, advancing their agenda."

The other Harchen reporters watched with apprehension, though they inched toward the exit. I respected that Cilany hadn't changed her skeptical ways, but these questions were wasting time. She was too inquisitive for her own good. From the tone of her rhetoric, I wondered if she had bought into the anti-human propaganda.

"Their sickening eyes made my spines bristle for days. I thought the humans would torture me, and lay waste to any civilization they crossed paths with." I chewed my claws with impatience. "I believed every empathetic act they did had an ulterior motive; I wanted them all dead. And I remember it all, unlike a brainwashed individual."

Cilany climbed to her feet. "So why would we help humans send a message? After what they did to us?"

"What they did to you?! You attacked their home, unprovoked. It's the Arxur attacking you now. They're not affiliated."

"This is a coordinated bombardment against every species in our coalition… at least, those that we can make contact with. Someone *had* to tip the grays off days ago. Are you sure about that unaffiliated claim, Sovlin?"

Shock coursed through my veins. The other coalition members were under siege too? A specific attack against the races who targeted Earth led to some dark conclusions. If these raids weren't spontaneous acts of violence, then maybe the Gojid cradle…no.

The humans were kind to noncombatants on the cradle, imperiling their own lives for our welfare. Terran rules of warfare disallowed attacks against civilians. Those soldiers fought tooth and nail to protect our cities, and cared for our refugees with the utmost kindness. I couldn't believe that they would set such a plan in motion, but who else would've contacted the grays?

The humans were very interested in negotiating with the Arxur, during that last interrogation. It's possible they reached out, I decided. *Protector help us, if they jumped sides out of desperation.*

Cilany shuddered. "You know the Terrans talk to the grays; I can see it in your eyes."

"The humans were pursuing diplomatic avenues, but they also despised what the Arxur did to our worlds. It *has* to be an accident if they shared this," I sighed.

"All I care about is the honest truth…and you might not like what that truth is. I can't help you spread human deceit. Not even to save my life."

"This isn't about humans, Cilly. I'm here because the Federation are killing each other, over how they voted. It's going to doom us all. Just please, come with me now, and take a look at the facts. That's it."

Fear shone in the female Harchen's eyes momentarily, and her skin morphed into the beige shade of the walls. I took that as a sign that she was camouflaging to head out. The other staffers had no qualms scampering down the stairwell ahead of me. They'd take their chances with an unstable, predator-tainted Gojid over an Arxur slaughter fleet.

Terrified shrieks echoed from the first Harchen staffers to exit the building. They turned back, tripping in their haste back up the stairwell. I gestured for them to quiet down, and raised my gun. There must be an Arxur cattle squad or an eaten Harchen in sight, which meant we needed to depart quickly.

I peeked my head out the door. Horror brought my spines to full

bristle, as I saw five grays leaning against the escape pod. The vicious predators were waiting for the prey to wander into their grasp; my stationary shuttle must've been sighted along their route. The hunters seemed delighted by the unexpected appearance of a Gojid; I suppose that was a rare meal, post-cradle.

There was no way I could shoot all of them, especially with their superior reflexes. Running was impossible too, since my shuttle was our ticket off this rock. Had I just brought the Harchen to their deaths? My brain froze in terror for a split second, sealing my fate.

One Arxur pounced from all fours, and dragged me by the arm out into the open. Saliva coated my fur in a sticky dousing, as its monstrous fangs pierced my skin. My initiative for the humans was going to end with me as a predator's meal.

Chapter 60

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 20, 2136

The feeling of teeth in my shoulder produced a sharp pain. The joint was about ripped from the socket, as I was dragged across the asphalt. I wriggled in the predator's jaws, punching its snout to release its grip. The stabbing of my long claws drew blood, and it tossed me onto the ground with a shake of its head. My body slammed against our metallic shuttle; all I could see was stars.

The pounding of my heart was a nauseating experience. This must be what my family felt as they were toyed with, before being turned into a screaming meal. I couldn't give these Arxur cattle fiends the satisfaction of screaming or crying. Maybe it was worth some sort of plea, to get them to spare the Harchen.

The sole option that crossed my mind was to invoke the humans. They were the only ones the grays had a remote respect for. If the primates had directed the Arxur Dominion to this vulnerable civilian populace, perhaps they would abandon anything the Terrans allegedly claimed.

"S-stop!" I squealed. "I'm a human slave, on a mission to expose t-the Federation's lies. When they killed your c-cattle like you say… they w-want…want to get t-the details for you!"

To my amazement, the gray paused in its stalking position. "The humans did claim the Gojid homeworld, and we recognized their stake. I can smell them on your fur. But where are our fellow predators, if you're their property? They wouldn't set you free."

"T-they have my family," I sobbed, with fake despondency. "I'll do whatever they want…even if it's harmful to the Federation!"

Confusion flashed in Cilany's eyes. The Harchen reporter knew my family was long-deceased, so that lie wouldn't fool her. I didn't understand why the prey reptiles hadn't made a run for it yet. There were no good options, but stalling the Arxur gave them a small window of escape.

The bloodied predator flashed a snarl. "Clever. But why are you on

this world? With those who attacked Earth?"

"These Harchen are p-priority assets for the humans. I don't ask questions…but I'm s-sure it's for a good reason. Let us leave, please."

The grays conferred for a moment, and inspected a smoking section of the shuttle hood. I couldn't believe they were listening to any of my bullshit. There was a brief flicker of hope, that we might fall under Terran immunity. Plopping myself upright, I nursed the wounded arm with a ginger touch.

Talking to them is revolting, but the Arxur just confirmed that this assault is retaliation for Earth. Cilany was right. What have the humans done?!

"We'll let you leave as a token of good faith, slave. We mangled your engine though, so you'll need to find another way off world," the Arxur spokes-monster decided. "But the Harchen stay. I think you are disobeying your orders, to save our enemies."

The prey reptiles scampered back into the stairwell, only to find themselves blocked by a laughing gray. A single beast must've landed on the roof, cutting off any escape. They intended to flush the Harchen out into the street, one way or another. My eyes widened in horror, as the grays herded them into a cage.

"Stop! T-the humans want these four as media tools, really," I pleaded.

The vicious predator snorted. "The humans want all of them dead. On that matter, it just so happens our interests align."

I wondered whether the Terrans would enjoy the sight of the panicked Harchen reporters, sealed together in a degrading heap. My imprisoners would despise this raid, wouldn't they? The cage door slammed shut, and the Arxur gestured for me to scurry off. It would be easy to save myself, but I couldn't watch cattle be hauled away.

My gaze darted over to my gun, which had fallen into the dirt. Odds were, I could only get off a shot or two, before the grays mowed me down with prejudice. I had to try something to rescue these Harchen, no matter how suicidal. It was a matter of waiting for the Arxur to lose focus, and accepting that I was about to die.

"Is there a problem?" a throaty snarl echoed from my right.

Carlos stomped across the road, clad head-to-toe in protective pelts. A flashlight was mounted to his helmet, and his binocular eyes hid behind a glass visor. A massive gun rested across his muscular forearm. I was never so elated to see a flesh-eating predator in my life.

But what the hell is my guard doing here? I don't even know that he won't leave the Harchen to their fate. Or worse, laugh about it.

The human stopped a few paces from the Arxur posse, and crossed his arms in a formidable stance. The talkative gray, who must be the unit leader, sized up the omnivore. It narrowed its eyes with blazing ferocity, challenging Carlos' will. I didn't know how the UN soldier faced that stare.

The reptilian predator bared its fangs. "Your slave wants to help these Harchen escape. It is using its subjugation as a cover, claiming this is done on your orders."

Carlos' pupils flicked to the cramped cage. "You heard Sovlin and his true orders correctly; he's an obedient servant. We want to send a message to the Federation, and these are the right individuals for the job. Simple."

A relieved sigh escaped my lips. I was grateful that the human backed me up, after I deviated our flight path to recruit Terran enemies. He might take these Harchen prisoner or even execute them, but he wouldn't eat them. His kind wasn't like the grays. At worst, I could reason with him, and make sense of the questionable things he might do.

"Why can't you find another 'pet?'" the gray hissed. "We did all the work, and we claimed this batch. These prey are of no particular importance…no different than thousands like them, with the same qualifications!"

Carlos shuffled closer. "Our personnel selections are made off of data, simulations, and the best strategic minds on Earth. Are you questioning our judgment?!"

"Yes. I am."

"Say it again, you fucking coward!"

"I am questioning the judgment of weak, naïve primitives. You haven't a clue what you're doing, or what it means to survive in this galaxy!"

The human rose up on his toes, and pressed his slender nose inches from the Arxur's maw. The gray straightened, as Carlos tried to match its height. It breathed a deafening snarl at the UN soldier, but he wouldn't back down. Defiance glowed in the primate's eyes, despite being outclassed.

"I could snap your puny neck with a single bite!" the Arxur roared.

Carlos jabbed his gun barrel into its stomach. "And I could blow your intestines apart, with a single finger. But we're on the same side, so why don't we work this out another way?"

"Hmmph. A contest of strength. You fight me one-on-one, without those overcompensating weapons of yours. If you win, you can have these Harchen."

"I'm game, if you'll agree not to bite. Unless you think you're too weak to fight without…*overcompensating* fangs?"

"Oh, let's do this. I'm going to beat the snot out of you, human!"

The Terran soldier backed away, and tucked his rifle off to the side. He raised his clawless paws in front of his face, forming white-knuckled fists. What was to stop the gray from executing him, now that he was disarmed? Luckily for Carlos, it was itching to release its aggression.

The Arxur lunged at the human with a blunt swipe, which was barely dodged. It lashed out with a tail sweep, knocking the guard off his feet. The monster whirled around with quick jabs, which the primate blocked with an elbow. Carlos rolled out of the way, and scrambled back to a standing position. He looked slow and toothless compared to the reptilian, not managing a single swing of his own.

Carlos scurried backward, and tried to deflect the oncoming barrage. Sweat glistened on his olive skin; tears showed in his artificial pelts. The Arxur aimed a jab at his abdomen, but the human danced away on nimble feet. While he was focused on the claws, it swung its snout at him with force. The truncated maw nailed the guard right in the chest, and sent him flying backward.

The poor guy is getting his ass handed to him. Why did he think this was a good idea to negotiate? Damn humans and their aggression.

Carlos sucked in a wheezing breath, but hopped back to his paws. The gray charged at him once more, and the human pummeled it in the nostrils. It shrugged off the punch with a snort. The UN guard

attempted to deliver a kick, but the reptilian caught his frail leg. It snickered as the human flailed, hopping on one leg.

“This isn’t even a fight.” The Arxur tugged the primate’s ankle, and knocked him onto his rump. It dragged him through the dirt for several paces. “We may treat you like equals, but you don’t make demands of us. You don’t intimidate anyone.”

Carlos kicked its clasped paw with his other leg, wriggling free. “You…haven’t…beaten…”

“Stay down, weakling. I’ve kicked the shit out of you. Know when to admit defeat; basic humility would do you good.”

The human began to rise, only to be nailed across the mouth by a tail lash. Crimson blood bubbled on his lip, and he spit the liquid into the dirt. He rolled onto his back, watching as the Arxur gloated in its victory. His hand darted to his head, wrenching the flashlight off his headgear. He shone it inches from its left pupil.

The Arxur shrieked as the brightness flooded its gaze, blinking. Carlos popped back up on wobbly legs, and staggered in grappling range. The human drove his knee into its stomach, before tackling it with all of his weight. He rolled off to the side, and wrapped an elbow around its neck. The gray struggled to break loose, but its oxygen supply was dwindling.

“Game, set, and match. Tap out,” Carlos gurgled.

The gray palmed at the human’s elbow with feeble swats, its hideous eyes bulging. Carlos released his grip with a toothy snarl. It coughed several times, caressing its throat. The creature struggled to get back to its feet, and the Terran helped it stand.

“You…cheated,” it sputtered. “No weapons.”

The UN guard shrugged. “I didn’t use a weapon. Just an illumination device.”

“You broke the spirit of our sparring, which is cheating to my eyes. You show little respect to your allies, and you’re lucky I like irreverence. Take the damn Harchen; it’s a whopping four cattle.”

The Arxur slunk off with narrowed gazes, as their leader hobbled away. True to their word, the demons left the Harchen’s cage behind. The relief that flooded my veins was indescribable, though my hammering heart wouldn’t pipe down. I raced over to the

human, and flung my arms around him with choking sobs.

Carlos stiffened, and pulled my paws off him. “Uh, yeah. Don’t do that, man.”

“S-sorry. I’m just really grateful for your help,” I muttered. “What are you doing here?”

“Keeping an eye on you, obviously. We were concerned about your little pit stop, and followed you down here. I would appreciate if you’d not go around calling yourself a slave in the future.”

“It was improvisation. Can’t argue with results.”

“Speaking of improvisation, you put the whole mission at risk with this little stunt. The fuck were you thinking?!”

“It was supposed to be a brief, easy trip. I wanted someone I knew, a friend, on the team. I’ve dealt with enough people who hate me in recent weeks.”

“Whatever. Let’s get your friends out of there. Hope they understand we’re the only ride out. If they run off, I’m not going to stop the grays from nabbing them next time.”

The human unclasped the cage door, and watched as the Harchen tumbled out. Cilany inspected the predator with petrified eyes. Her comrades seemed repulsed by Carlos’ lumbering form too, squealing as they returned his stare. The journalists’ eyes darted to the side, as though they wanted to run.

“D-did you tell the Arxur to attack us?” Cilany blurted.

Carlos narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know; that’s above my clearance level. If we did, it was likely to deter your forces from attacking us. The UN wouldn’t want this to happen.”

I slumped my shoulders. “Not even people like Samantha? Wouldn’t she want the Harchen to feel the same losses as Earth?”

An indignant cough came from an abandoned vehicle behind us. Upon closer inspection, the female human was stretched out behind cover. A thin rifle barrel with a glass ornament was propped on the ground. She must’ve been monitoring the interaction the entire time, and watching Carlos’ back in case his confrontation went awry.

“I don’t believe people deserve to die for what they are. That’s the Federation,” she growled. “If an individual renounces their

government, I'm sure Earth would welcome them with open arms. Now the ones responsible, complicit, or indifferent—"

Carlos cleared his throat. "We parked a few blocks away. Somewhere we wouldn't be visible to the whole world, *Sovlin.* Stick close guys, and follow us."

The human retraced his route with delicate bootsteps. His rifle was ready if any Arxur crawled out of the woodwork, and Samantha fell in at his side. The predator guards forged the path for the Harchen journalists, ignoring their hesitance. It was remarkable to see the vengeful primates, aiding a species that partook in the attack days prior.

Chapter 61

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 20, 2136

Bombs continued to crater the industrial city, as we wandered through back alleyways. I tried to place myself in the humans' mindset. It was brave, remarkably so, to wander this Harchen colony sporting a predatory appearance. Any frazzled prey soldiers would be happy to take a potshot at an invading flesh-eater, not differentiating the primates from the Arxur.

The truth was, I knew so little about Samantha and Carlos as people. What compelled them to land amidst an orbital bombardment, on a world that bore nothing but hostile intent? Whether they assumed I was a fugitive or not, the Terran guards had no idea what awaited them here. They had no backup, and were outnumbered.

The Harchen government thinks humans are a blight to be mopped up. If extermination officers here got their toes on them…well, it might make my treatment of Marcel look like summer camp.

Footsteps scurried ahead of us, with no way of telling if the source was Arxur or Harchen. Yet the primates showed no signs of distress, plodding along their intended path in silence. I was stunned that Samantha hadn't berated the journalists for their species' actions; she had been all too quick to lose her temper with me.

"Don't do anything to draw attention to yourselves." Carlos wiggled ahead on his stomach, the stealthy movements of a hunter inching up on prey. "A Harchen patrol of seven or so with, uh, flamethrowers? In metallic suits? Shit, looks like they have thermal cameras."

My eyes narrowed. "Extermination officers."

"Great. And they're gonna see us as soon as they look this way," the male guard huffed.

The Harchen journalists' expression seemed torn between excitement and trepidation. No doubt they were second-guessing the decision to escape with the humans; they just figured it was

their only chance. I don't think they'd shed any tears over seeing my guards burned to a crisp, even if the predators saved their lives.

"What's with the flamethrowers?" Samantha growled.

I chewed at my claws. "You don't want to know."

The humans signaled a course to flank the exterminators with their hands, and crept ahead. We peeked out behind the wall, just in time to see an Arxur death squad charging the Harchen. The prey reptiles crept back from the rabid beasts, and lured them forward. Gasoline spurted from the lampposts at their cue, the built-in predator deterrent for our settlements.

The oncoming Arxur were doused head-to-toe, and paused with alarm. The Harchen exterminators flung a match in the gas, spared from the effect by the flameproof garments. The screams were on another level; happiness fluttered in my heart, finally seeing the grays taste a bit of suffering. That was the agonized death these cattle collectors deserved! That was what I wished I could dole out to them for years.

Carlos and Samantha looked horrified, however, watching the burning Arxur flail about. I guess I couldn't blame them, since that was what the officers would do to their kind too. The Harchen exterminators chased the grays with flamethrowers, and steered them away from any source of water. My heart twisted, as I thought about them putting the humans down like normal predators.

"Well, now I see what the flamethrowers are for," the female guard sighed. "Must you burn predators at the stake? It's the worst way to die."

I tossed my head in a noncommittal gesture. "It cleanses the affected area. Not just of any offspring or other dens, but also any traces of their filth. I don't want to step in fecal matter that used to be an animal…no offense."

Cilany nodded in agreement. "What if your traces and fluids get in the water supply? Or half-eaten carcasses you leave behind attract more predators? Gross."

"'You', as in humans?!" Samantha hissed. "God forbid you might inhale some predator molecules on the wind. Carlos and I should be put down at once!"

The male human pursed his lips, leaning back against a wall.

Sadness glowed in his eyes as he listened to the conversation, and I don't think he had the words to express it. For the first time in my life, I thought about whether animals deserved agonizing deaths. Why couldn't we put a bullet in the ones we saw, and *then* torch them?

Terran presence was a contaminating factor, by technicality; I could only imagine the reactions of Venlil extermination officers. Nothing ill-fated had come from me breathing the same air as predators, or eating plants grown in infested Earth soil. Our species had survived in eras where hunters left their excretions in the landscape, inhabiting every corner of our planets.

The humans have shown us a different side of nature, even if some of it is disgusting. Suffering for what they were born as is wrong.

"I'm sorry, Carlos. Your life has no value to them, and they'll have no qualms about killing you," I said. "That said, I didn't mean that you were filth. I mean, you need to shower, but…"

He snorted. "You're an asshole."

"And you're a sweaty, bloody mess of a predator. If they could burn off just those grimy pelts and that outer-skin part, that might be okay."

The human flashed his teeth, and I hoped that was the friendly version of their snarl. Perhaps this wasn't the safest choice for cheering him up, but from what I'd seen, teasing was good for their mental state. If I had misread those cues, the guard might be socking me in the jaw in a second; my spines bristled with unease. Terran behavior sure was an illusive concept to gauge.

Cilany gaped in alarm, at the sight of the predator's fangs on display. She seemed concerned for my safety, especially after I riled up the primate. The Harchen shriveled away in disgust, as he wiped the sweat off his neck with a towel. The male human wrapped the grimy rag around my neck, chuckling at my mortified expression. He looked pleased with himself.

"Sometimes, I almost like you, Sovlin," Carlos growled. "Okay, we have to get across the square. Let's take these fuckers out, and don't walk under any street-lamps."

My reporter friend shared a glance with her colleagues. "You're killing them?"

“I’m sorry, are we supposed to let them fry us alive? Move out, and keep to cover.”

The human soldiers lined up their rifles, and marched out as a pair. The Harchen exterminators hadn’t heard our chatter over the Arxur screams; they were leaving no chances of a gray living to fight another day. One officer was waddling toward us, pursuing a blackened cattle soldier that had collapsed on the street. Her head snapped up as she spotted our heat signatures, and she pointed at us.

“MORE PREDATORS! Humans, with hostages,” she spat. “Light them up!”

Carlos cleared his throat. “Shit, there’s no cover. Uh, maybe we can use you all as bargaining chips? Just pretend, of course. They won’t shoot us with you leading, surely…”

“Oh, they’ll nail us too if they can’t free us. Better dead than to be your cattle,” I sighed. “Though I imagine our deaths will be… quicker.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “Yes, *real* sapients don’t deserve to burn alive. But predators don’t feel anything, right? We were destined to be firewood; it’s just perfect.”

“Well, I for one like you guys not exterminated, so hurry up and find a hiding spot. Try the buildings.”

Carlos attempted to kick down an apartment door, but couldn’t get the metal base to budge. He took a running start at the frame, and fell back with frustration. Samantha fired several bursts at the Harchen exterminators, covering for her partner. The enemy responded with their sidearms, while lighting the street ablaze in all directions.

The Terran male glanced for another entry, before gesturing to retreat to the alleyway. The two humans ducked back into cover, their heavy breathing unpleasant to the ear. The Harchen journalists ran away from the confrontation; I chased after them with frustration. Thinking quickly, I wrestled the gun out of a burned Arxur’s paws.

“Get the fuck back here!” I fired several shots at a balcony just above their heads, and watched as those four dropped to the floor in unison. “We need to get off this world, before the cattle squads

finish up shop, or we're all fucking dead!"

Cilany raised her limbs. "Exactly. Sovlin, that area is on fire and the predators are shooting their guns at Harchen. I was trying to trust you, because you've never steered me wrong before. But we need a new plan."

"There is no other plan!"

"Yes…there is. The humans are distracted by the exterminators; let's go take their ship. We know it's close by, and there's not much time."

"We're *not* leaving them! Those two you see back there saved hundreds of Gojid lives from the Arxur, and now, they're trying to save you. I care about them…don't you get it?"

The female journalist's skin morphed into a bright-orange, mirroring the tone of the flames. Her pupils surveyed mine for several moments, and I realized my eyes were watering at the thought of my guards on fire. Slumping her shoulders in defeat, she scampered back toward the hiding humans. Her colleagues followed her lead; it was clear the close-knit team didn't want to separate.

Seven exterminators charged through the alleyway, buffeting flames at the dumpster the humans crouched behind. Samantha unloaded a clip as suppressive fire, but she was cornered. Carlos cursed as his lower pelt sparked, and orange light danced across his kneecap. On instinct, he leapt up and shook his leg.

An exterminator lined up their sidearm, ignoring the human's pleading shout of 'Wait!' I needed to get a few paces closer to make the shot; there was no time. Fear glistened in Carlos eyes, as he tripped onto the street in a sprawled-out position. The fire had spread to his boots, and was making quick work of his pelt. I didn't want to see the predator die, but how…

Cilany emitted a high-pitched scream, and distracted the exterminators for a split second. I sprinted with the last of my energy, pulling the trigger at the gun-wielder. My first shot nailed the Harchen in the shoulder; the second one was a perfect rocket to the brain. Two officers whirled around, spewing fire at me. I grabbed my reporter friend, and we tumbled back behind a building wall.

"If we don't *all* die now, that is the second time I've saved Carlos'

life," I muttered. "I knew you wouldn't leave them."

Cilany shook her head. "I came back for you, Sovlin, not them. Every second we spend here is time we're still on the Arxur's radar. I hope hideous predators, with a monstrous history, are worth that to you."

"Those hideous predators are people, like us. Just watch them, how they act under pressure…you'll see."

Carlos tried to ignore the flames, shooting his sidearm despite the blinding panic. The male human only connected with a single Harchen, by way of ricochet. Most of his wild rounds ended up in a wall, missing his target by a wide margin. The primal terror of being set ablaze must be overwhelming his brain. That unbearable heat on his lower extremities, and watching it spread…I couldn't imagine.

Samantha was a one-woman harbinger of death, rolling out from behind the dumpster with fury. Her green eyes glowed with hunger; I could see the predator energy buzzing through her veins. She grabbed the flamethrower from the downed exterminator, and decided to give the officers a taste of their own medicine.

The Harchen formation wavered; they weren't used to predators wielding their devices. The extermination officers had flameproof gear to avoid this eventuality, but two sported tears in their suits from today's engagements. Samantha switched to her sidearm, as the panicked professionals bumbled into each other. She dished out two head shots, before diving back behind the dumpster.

That left three extermination officers on the prowl. While watching the human duo take out the majority of their comrades, they forgot all about the rogue Gojid prisoner. I popped back out from behind the wall, and sprayed gunfire with my claw locked on the trigger. Two Harchen figures toppled to the ground; Samantha didn't hesitate to terminate the final one.

"Carlos? You good?" I questioned.

Several grunts came from the alley. "Fuck! Help me."

The human's pant leg had almost completely burned away, little more than tatters. He kicked off his scorching boot, and his face contorted in a mask of pain. Those silly artificial pelts saved him from serious nerve damage, in all likelihood, but we needed to put

him out quick. I tugged that sweaty towel off my neck, slapping it on his ankle.

The flames began to dissipate as I smothered them, and the human rolled around to put out the embers. Samantha hustled over with a water bottle, breathing a sigh of relief at the sight of her partner unharmed. He rubbed the reddened skin on his leg, and struggled to his feet. His limbs trembled as he tried to stand; the female guard supported him with a gentle touch.

Carlos closed his eyes. “Thanks, Sovlin…and company. Let’s get out of here. I think I’ve had enough for one day.”

Samantha studied me in silence, with a little less venom than usual. The glint of surprise hung in her eyes. I figured she had expected me to abandon them when push came to shove. The curt predator didn’t resist my aid, when I propped myself under Carlos’ other arm. She flashed pearly fangs, and gave me a small nod.

“I see what you meant about their behavior. These humans help each other, even when one is weakened,” Cilany noted. “And you don’t seem alarmed by their snarls at all. That makes them capable of earning trust, attachment…loyalty.”

My nostrils flared with indignation. “And it makes you wonder why so many species tried to kill them, without giving them a chance. Assuming they have malevolent intentions, purely based on looks, is a recipe for disaster. It’s not right.”

“Before you jump to conclusions…I need a deeper dive into human history, and everything the Federation has on pre-space flight predators. I’d like to interview the pale, angry one there. That ape isn’t hiding their emotions; they would make a good contrast with Noah’s polished speech.”

“The angry *human* has a name,” Samantha snapped. “Unless you just want to refer to me as ‘it.’”

“Fascinating. Why is this one like this?”

Carlos limped ahead, clinging to my neck. “Sam’s family was in Melbourne. Everyone she cares about, her relatives, her husband, presumed dead. No chance to say good-bye. Her home, off the map. Write that: us predators grieve our families too.”

I suspected the worst case when she visited me on Venlil Prime, exuding hostility. Samantha never shared much about her life, but

she had imparted to Talpin that her brother was deaf. Her fondness had been unmistakable, with how thorough her offense was to the suggestion of him being killed. It was the first inkling I ever got of how tight Terran family units were.

But the husband tidbit took me by surprise. Carlos hadn't mentioned any progeny, though perhaps she planned on starting a family in the future. I had no idea that humans mated for life; I always thought that predators bred for breeding's sake. It sounded like they coupled for purposes beyond producing viable offspring. Of course, humans were capable of love, but their familial obsession always seemed to be the kids.

For predators, shouldn't procreation be a competitive selection process, driven by impulse? Parenting roles are a way of protecting offspring from rival mates…or so I thought. Poor Sam.

The female human lowered her eyes. "That wasn't your fucking place to share, Carlos. If you want to smear me for wanting revenge, Harchen, I couldn't care less. Just keep your racist thoughts to yourself."

"Now listen, if there is something more to your kind, I'm trying to unearth it. But I must start with your problematic Arxur ties," Cilany explained. "I also wonder how far humans will go, after the attack. It's strange that you freed us, Sam, since it's counterintuitive to your revenge."

"Revenge isn't about blind genocide. Now how about less chatter, more walking?"

Our posse trudged across the square, vigilant for any other activity. If any of my old crew saw me now, with a predator clinging to my body, they would have a conniption. Those arms built from the digestion of flesh felt warm and heavy, yet I wasn't disgusted by their touch. The emotional connection we established was hardly different than any other soldiers I'd served with. I wanted the humans to like me…to forgive me.

We staggered onto the Terrans' ship with exhaustion, and the Harchen journalists skittered aboard close behind. Cilany was surveying the humans with interest; I could see the makings of a story brewing in her mind. Our little band was going to leave no stone unturned investigating the Federation. With a team of inquisitive individuals at my side, it was time to get the answers the

predators desired.

Chapter 62

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 22, 2136

The fact that the Arxur came to Earth's rescue caused less of an uproar than I expected. It became a fact that was conveniently ignored by my government at large; instead, we celebrated the brave Venlil who hurled themselves in the Krakotl's path. Many talking heads were happy to sell the narrative that the grays were taken for fools, assuming the newest predators shared their wickedness. The general public were unaware of the looming deadline to trade for our cattle victims.

That ticking hourglass was on my mind, as I accompanied Noah to the United Nations' remembrance speech. The event was open to human refugees; I hoped that I could find the strength to treat the upset primates with kindness. The shock of the heartbreaking images on Earth was beginning to wane, but my soul still ached for our friends. It was terrible to see an innocent species suffering without cause.

"This has all been so sudden, and I know you've had pushback from your opponents. Have we outstayed our welcome here, Tarva?" Noah asked.

I pressed my cheek against his forearm. "Never. There's a few people that want you shipped off our world, soon as possible, but they're a minority. I'll always fight for you."

"Fight, huh? All that's left is fighting. My pops used to say space was our ticket to a better future. I'm glad he didn't see me fuck it all up. How disappointed he must be, if he's watching from the afterlife."

"Oh sweetheart, I'm sure he'd be so proud of you, and the man you are. There was nothing else you could've said to the Federation. What happened to Earth has nothing to do with your speech. Nothing, you hear me?"

"I appreciate you saying that. I do. And if you don't mind me saying so, you look beautiful today."

I had no idea how to respond to such a forward remark, coming from a human, but it did warm my heart. The dynamic between Noah, an alien predator, and myself was not something to address at this particular moment. Clearing my throat awkwardly, I tried to track down Elias Meier. Earth's chief diplomat proceeded with grace in the past, but a nudge toward sensibility might be necessary. It was my hope that he lacked conviction in any violent rhetoric he touted.

The last time I saw the Secretary-General was when word of Earth's devastation reached Venlil Prime. The fact that their militaries tallied such a miserable failure, and left their home at the Arxur's mercy, morphed the dignitary into someone else. The distraught Meier had promised to 'rend every enemy from limb to limb', before rushing off for an audience with that ghastly Chief Hunter. I hadn't been sure he'd survive an encounter with a predator that openly called me 'dinner' in our brief encounter.

But the gray-haired human here now, mingling with alien dignitaries, was the person I knew. Meier had spent his lifetime building relationships with unique cultures. The only aspect he was unaccustomed to was the constant terror prey felt. But he was mindful enough, careful not to show his teeth to non-Venlil. His hands were kept in his pockets, to avoid gesticulating.

"—glad you asked about the Arxur," Meier was saying to Cupo. "When I spoke with them, face-to-face, their hotel room was pitch black. I couldn't make out much of anything, other than a massive shadow looming over me. There's a group of them, lying in wait, sizing me up like a cut of meat."

"And you still went in?! When you wanted to run away?" the Mazic president asked.

"What choice did I have? Our instincts are nothing compared to yours, but I was thoroughly creeped out. I do hope that you can forgive us for accepting their tête-à-tête…with ten thousand warships surrounding Earth, a dialogue felt much more palatable than subjugation."

The other Federation representatives were crowding the Secretary-General, eavesdropping. It was a relief, and a bit of a surprise, to see him conversing with those who didn't aid Earth. That smooth-tongued dialogue seeking the Mazic's forgiveness, not the other way

around, was stunning. I had expected him to launch into accusations over the indifference of their allies.

The way Meier was acting a week ago, I thought Earth was going to isolate from everyone but us and the Zurulians. I don't know what made him come to his senses, but this is a positive sign.

Cupo stepped forward on all four paws, shadowing the human leader with his bulky stature. I snorted with amusement, as I noticed Elias shuffle back. He tried to play it off as fidgeting, but the predator seemed nervous about the Mazic's size. I don't think the sand-colored mammal realized the Terrans were equally intimidated by him. The Earthborn diplomats were well aware that a single kick of panic could cause serious skeletal damage.

"I appreciate your explanation, but it still leaves me worried that you're turning on us," Cupo said.

Meier coughed pointedly. "There's a billion dead humans, and nothing will ever be the same again. Humanity stood alone, apart from the kindness of the Venlil, the Zurulians, and yes, the Arxur. Perhaps there would have been other options, if we received more help from our neighbors."

"I have never been dishonest with you: I don't trust you. I think humans should be given a chance, because you are our only hope. But placing my people in harm's way for predators, when that friendship is still a hypothetical, is unthinkable. Let alone raising arms against known sapients, who share centuries of partnered history with us."

The Mazic tensed as he breathed out the last word, expecting the predator to fly into a rage. The other alien diplomats listened with interest, perhaps because they held similar reasons. The Secretary-General's pupils darted around, and his lips curved down with disdain. Was it my imagination, or did his hair look whiter than last I saw him?

"That's valid. It would have been easy for you to choose them over us, when it came down to the wire. I suppose doing nothing is a concession of itself," Meier growled.

Cupo blinked in surprise. "What? I expected you to disown us."

"That's not why I'm here. Humanity, under UN leadership, will found our own Federation. I want as many members in our alliance

as possible. I've started a project, with promising results, to weed out alien fear responses. The Mazics are one of the races I think have the most potential; you could lead this initiative."

"This would require leaving the current Federation? I would want to retain membership in both…if I'd even roll in the dirt with you at all."

Tossa, the Nevok diplomat, flicked her cream-colored ears. "I wouldn't do anything that causes further risk to our trading networks."

"We can discuss this on a case-by-case basis," Meier said. "What I need right now is for each of you to step up, and bring the thousands of Gojid refugees we saved to shelters. Their colonies are also without a government and supplies; who knows how long the Arxur recognize our 'claim' to them. We no longer have the power to do anything about that."

Cupo flapped his big ears. "I can handle that, predator. The Gojids deserve help."

"Good. Beyond that, we politely request that you send aid shipments to Earth. Anything you can spare out of generosity to get us back on our feet. I hate having to beg so plainly, but my cities were turned into irradiated soup."

The Secretary-General's eyes darted over to the Sivkit ambassador, who had leapt into a wastebin at the first sight of humans. Perhaps it was time to confront her on her skittishness, though that would require a more private setting. While Meier was on the topic of aid shipments, this was the perfect time to slip to his side unnoticed.

The Nevok ambassador pounced on Elias' perceived weakness, and was rattling off a laundry list of terms. Tossa had attempted to barter for ownership of Luna and the asteroid belt, in the wake of the attack; this was an obvious nonstarter for the United Nations. This time, she was offering to manufacture ships and airdrop food in exchange for trade exclusivity. That was her true goal: to stop the Fissan Compact from landing advantageous deals.

The Fissans often undercut the Nevok's prices, and their trade war has spiraled to new heights. The fact that both of them reached out to actual predators, solely to screw the other over…

Halmina, the Fissan representative, pointed her horn in a

threatening manner. “I landed here two days ago, after our first representative *died*, and you’re trying to fuck me over? Human Meier, I’ll give you a month’s worth of food shipments *free,* with no strings attached. Just don’t agree to that.”

“Predators, the Fissans’ll steal anything proprietary right under your noses,” Tossa hissed. “Do you want a species known for corporate espionage on your turf? Accessing military blueprints at the first opportunity?”

“We didn’t steal your technology. We built it better and cheaper, and you can’t accept that. You used your monopoly to rip people off, so you can’t stand competition.”

“We turn a profit, which we deserve for the hard work of our brilliant engineers. You upstarts might as well be uplifts, with shoddy—”

“SHUT UP!” Noah roared. “Is now the time for your stupid feuds? What about Earth? If you want shit from humanity down the road, try helping us for the sake of helping us.”

The tension that fell over the conference hall was so thick, that you could cut it with a knife. Sivkit ambassador Axsely was banging her head against the wastebin, wailing at the predatory outburst. The representatives were lucky the media cameras weren’t rolling, and that the human refugee audience hadn’t been allowed in the auditorium yet.

Meier scratched his head with discomfort. “Well, I agree with him. A little charity and unity would be nice. I find the behavior of capitalizing on our misfortune rather, shall I say, predatory?”

The Nevok recoiled in shock, floored by a literal flesh-eater directing that insult at her. Halmina at least had the decency to look shameful, pawing at the mane on her long neck. Something flashed in Noah’s eyes as he inspected her silver horn; he muttered something about Fissans ‘only needing hooves.’ I was beginning to wonder if my friend was losing it.

Meier glanced at a wristband, then gestured for everyone to find their position. He curled his lip at Axsely’s trash-can hideout, and pushed the squealing grazer into a backroom. The auditorium doors were unlocked for public entry, and human spectators shoved their way inside. It blew my mind to see this many predators in one spot,

on my own planet.

I leaned over to the Secretary-General's ear. "I want to talk to you, friend. You deserve an overview of how we're treating your refugees."

"Not right now, Governor, but I have urgent information on the Arxur. You won't believe what Isif actually said," he replied.

The gray-haired primate's eyes flitted to the entryway, and widened in alarm. I wondered what spooked him about the incoming Terran refugees. There was nothing to make any of these people look more predatory than the others. If someone tried to charge the Secretary-General, I'm sure his bodyguards would intercept them. It seemed paranoid to travel with armed soldiers nearby at all times, but humans were poor at assessing danger.

"Tarva, where the hell is the event security?" Meier hissed, through gritted teeth. "There are a lot of important figures in one place."

I snorted. "You actually think people would march through that door, and attack a public gathering?"

"I…yes, I do. Damnit, you told us this was a secure venue! Get every diplomat to leave, only a few at a time. We don't want to incite panic."

"You think danger is lurking around every corner. Humans are safe here, Elias. I've guaranteed that nobody will try to exterminate your packs."

"You misunderstand; I'm worried for you. Any of us are capable of violence when pushed. You're dealing with humans who have lost everything, and are looking for anyone to blame. Especially aliens, and especially the UN, understand?"

My focus turned to the incoming humans. Many were holding printed images of their cities or loved ones, and their predator eyes were stained with tears. Several Terrans were comforting each other, with light embraces or hand squeezes. These people looked devastated and heartbroken, nothing like angry beasts planning to maul the fluffy aliens. Regardless, it wasn't like Venlil executed the attack.

However, the level of jumpiness Meier was displaying was going to interfere with his speaking ability. If he required muscle to assuage his paranoia, it was better than seeming unstable on a live

broadcast. Who would be cruel enough to target an event with such a gut-wrenching focus? I hadn't thought Elias a man with delusions of grandeur, but maybe the recent power bestowed in him had gone to his head.

The purpose of this was to console the hurting humans, and honor Earth's memory. Even I know these predators don't just attack out of hunger.

"We'll postpone the ceremony, if you insist," I whispered. "But you can tell it to our Federation guests."

Elias sped off. The human exchanged words with the Fissans and the Paltans; they were the only two to send a replacement for the deceased ambassadors. Perhaps the Takkans, Dossur, and Thafki were weighing their options…or they doubted the predators' message. Regardless, the Secretary-General made it a priority to evacuate the newcomers first. I suppose he didn't want to risk them losing another diplomat to a violent end.

Whatever Meier told the duo, it scared them sufficiently. Fearful expressions stretched across the aliens' faces, and they bolted from the auditorium without hesitation. Was that predacious delivery necessary? I glared at the human, willing him to be more tactful.

Cupo stomped up to the UN leader. "What are you up to? Is there a reason two ambassadors spoke with you, and immediately saw themselves out?"

"Keep your voice down!" Meier hissed.

"You damn predators always keep me in the dark! We're in danger, aren't we? I am sick of having threats concealed right in front of my trunk!"

Nervous chatter swelled from the primarily-human audience, as the Mazic president made a scene. The fire alarm was activated by a bystander, and visceral screams echoed through the sprinkler-doused room. Several Terrans made a beeline for the exit, pushing and shoving each other to get out. It seemed like the predators were verging on a stampede, which I didn't know was within their capability.

"THE BACKPACK! It's blinking!" A human's thunderous voice permeated the chaos. "Run!"

Ambassador Noah wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and

hurried me toward our emergency exit. I had no idea what had just happened, but it was tugging at my own panicky instincts. Through the chemical fog, I worried that someone was going to get trampled in this madness.

Elias was irresponsible. We should've just proceeded with the speech, instead of—

A deafening blast rocked my eardrums, and the subsequent shockwave sent me and Noah flying. The impact rattled me down to the bone marrow, making every nerve tingle. Vision slipped away, and my addled brain could only register an incessant ringing. Pain flared in my tail. Something sharp, like a needle or a glass shard, had impaled itself in the bushy appendage.

I coughed weakly, trying to move my arms. My pupils flicked out toward the sitting area, where a charcoal-colored mist shrouded the vicinity. Humans closest to the blast area were soaked in blood, and some seemed to be missing limbs. Their open mouths suggested they were screaming for help. I still couldn't hear anything but high-pitched reverberations.

Meier crawled over, his attire caked in dust. The aged predator was sporting cuts across his wrinkled forehead, but his eyes were something alien. I'd never seen a human in combat mode in person; that dilated stare jolted some life into my veins. My brain recognized him as an animal, with the erratic eye movements and strained breathing.

The Secretary-General stopped adjacent to me, and jostled the shoulder of a facedown human. Horror flooded my chest, as I realized it was Noah beside me. Elias punched at the Ambassador's chest several times, until glassy brown eyes blinked open. The elder Terran slapped the astronaut across the cheek, trying to snap him awake.

Meier's gaze searched for other survivors, before resting on me. His lips moved, but I could only make out hints of the sound. I think he was telling me to run away. The only reason I suppressed my fear of the adrenaline-fueled predator, was concern for Noah. That worry was a sickening knot in my stomach; I needed to see him stand up.

"T…va," the human ambassador croaked. "Get…here."

I had no idea if he was saying get out of here, or get over here, but I

took it as the latter. My paws rushed over to his side, and his glazed eyes drifted to my tail. Horror flashed in his pupils; concern crossed Meier's taut grimace as well. The injury must be worse than I thought, but I decided not to look. I didn't want to pass out now.

Noah struggled upright, fueled by worry for me. His hands steered me onward, and his wobbly steps became more certain. My mind hadn't yet processed that humans had attacked their own remembrance ceremony. Right now, I prayed that there wouldn't be a follow-up strike from whatever deranged predator plotted this.

Chapter 63

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 22, 2136

When the humans began their cultural exchange, they shared the blemishes of their history. The Satellite Wars almost sent the powerful nations back to the Stone Age, by their own words. Federation researchers also documented the senseless atrocities of a prior era, and noted the uncanny resemblance to Arxur brutality. It had been difficult for me to picture the Earthlings acting so violent toward each other; those moral people killing millions of their race was unimaginable.

The scale of bloodshed today forced me to reckon with that truth. I knew in my heart what the predators were capable of, but I hadn't wanted to accept it. Sweeping their history under the rug, in favor of the empathy tests and the charitable acts toward us, was easier. Talking with Noah and Meier made me want to believe they'd changed as a species.

Maybe even your human friends could act out of aggression; you've seen outbursts from both. They restrain it because of learned morality… empathy. But does Noah ever fantasize about killing people, just a tiny bit?

"Keep walking, Tarva." The Terran ambassador placed a trembling hand on my shoulder, and made me jump. "You can't go into shock. We need to get you to a hospital. Please, please, stay with me!"

Tears soaked my cheek fur. "W-where are the other alien diplomats?"

"I'll look for them. But Tarva needs a tourniquet, Williams," Meier growled.

"Yeah, I agree. Listen Tarva, if anything happens…I want you to know that I love you," Noah whispered. "You don't have to say it, or feel it, back. I'm going to protect you."

The chocolate-skinned predator scooped me up into his arms, passion alight in his binocular gaze. His visage became fuzzy; I felt cold, despite the warmth of his body. Saline swelled around his

eyes, as he ripped his shirt sleeve off with his bare fingers. His nails had turned gray from grime and soot, and orange blood was smeared across his chest. There was a lot of it, sourced from my tail.

Knowing the aggression hardwired into his genome should have struck sense into me. Humans were coded to be destructive and violent. Still, the fondness in my heart cried out louder than ever. My Noah was a little hot under the collar, but only when faced with injustice. I trusted him with my life; I couldn't make myself regret befriending the Terrans.

"I love…you too," I croaked.

The human's lips quivered, torn between a smile and sorrow. He wrapped the cloth around my tail tightly, and blinding pain rocketed up my spine. It felt like he was amputating the limb, wrenching it from my body with an iron fist. I yowled in agony, burying my face in his chest. His brow furrowed, as he finished tying the knot.

The astronaut patted my head. "It's done now, I'm sorry. I had to stop the bleeding. You're going to be fine."

"I don't know if I am. This was…an isolated incident. Right?" I whimpered.

"Honestly, we've had tragedies like this happen on Earth before, though it's rare. All I can ask is that you don't judge us by our worst individuals. This is why the Federation wants us all dead. Most humans would never do something like this. You know that."

"But what…kind of…monster would?"

"I don't know who did this, or their motives. They're sick, with grief or some disorder. Anything I say is speculation, but we're going to hunt the bastard down. Er, pardon my word choice."

If this was a drastic action borne of anger, human emotions needed to be monitored under a microscope. I had tried to normalize the predators' stay, and welcome them like any other class of refugees. But if there could be mass carnage any time a lone Terran was upset, I didn't know how safe it was to integrate them into our society. What other venues could be targets of senseless violence? How many Venlil lives could be lost?

My vision began to dim, as the fear chemicals lending energy

tapered off. Ambassador Noah lunged at me with bared teeth, catching himself a hair short of my face. He released an incoherent roar in my direction. The feel of the predator's warm breath on my lips, and the sight of maddened eyes inches from my face, sent flight cocktails coursing through my veins.

Electricity jerked at my muscle fibers. Instincts propelled me upright, and sent me stumbling away blindly. It took me several seconds to realize Noah was intending to startle me awake. Triggering my flight response had jolted me back to consciousness, though that might not last long. I collided with Meier, who had his back turned to me.

"Shit! Watch where…Tarva. Noah, you need to get her out of here!" the Secretary-General spat.

The human leader had thrown caution to the wind, pressing his shoulder by a downed Cupo's side. The Mazic was bleeding from several places, including a mutilated leg. I appreciated Meier's efforts, but he was going to be crushed if Cupo fell. The old primate couldn't support a creature several times his weight.

"Leave him, Elias. You can't carry him. Come with us," I coughed.

Cupo flared his trunk. "I am conscious, Tarva! I don't want to die, enough that I'm letting a predator *touch* me. My skin is crawling."

The gray-haired human gritted his teeth. "Nobody else is going to die on my watch. We have to help the big guy up…give him a fighting chance."

Ambassador Noah frowned, before kneeling beside the Secretary-General. The two humans pushed Cupo off his side, and hoisted him back to his round feet. The Mazic teetered on his legs for a moment, but the predators strained with the last of their might. I noticed scarlet fluid dripping through Noah's short mane.

The sand-colored mammal swayed, as he fixed a glare on the human. "What the fuck happened, predator? You predicted this, so you clearly know."

"Oh, get to a hospital, President Cupo. I'm going to look for Tossa and Axsely," Elias growled.

"Let me help. I can carry them," the Mazic president offered.

"In your condition? Just go; I'll deal with it."

“My eyes work just fine. You’re not going to cover up these deaths. I won’t leave until we find the Nevok, at least.”

“Whatever. Look around, be my guest.”

Cupo glanced in every direction, before pointing his trunk at the arctic-colored biped on the floor. Elias released an audible gasp, and raced to the Nevok’s side. His slender fingers crept to the pulse point above Tossa’s hoof. His binocular eyes closed, and he shook his head with a defeated expression.

There was nothing but gore among the human spectators, with many primates dead or dying. First responders were nowhere to be seen; we were alone in this mess. The Mazic president took a final look at the decimated auditorium, before trundling over to the nearest exit. I imagined he would blame Meier for this catastrophe for a long time.

I limped over to the backroom where Axsely was, ignoring Noah beckoning me to the exit. Ironically, the Sivkit’s cowardice in the trashcan left her more sheltered from the blast than anyone. Her fluffy white form was huddling in the receptacle, unconscious. The rise and fall of her chest was visible, so I assumed she passed out from terror.

Meier was right behind me, and picked the Sivkit diplomat up with haste. That was not going to end well, if she woke up carried by a predator. Noah pointed us toward the side exit with a scowl on his face. Fighting off dizziness, I sandwiched myself between the two humans. All strength dissipated, as the duo ushered me through an exterior door. The shivering was unbearable, and my paws were becoming heavy as concrete.

“I want…I’m ready to sleep. So c-cold,” I gasped at Noah. “Please, don’t scare me again.”

The human grimaced. “We’re almost there. Just stay awake a little longer, okay?”

A shaken UN bodyguard brought a bright-red kit over to Elias, who deferred it to Noah. The Secretary-General couldn’t administer first aid while his hands were full with the Sivkit. The astronaut popped open the lid, and pried out the fattest syringe I’d ever seen. Before I could wince at the size of the needle, he jabbed it against my neck. An adrenaline surge caused my limbs to convulse, and I fell over,

gasping.

My heart feels like someone is squeezing it inside my ribcage. Sure hope my atrium doesn't burst…

The hormones did the trick to stabilize my blood pressure, and I tried to get a grip on my surroundings. Rough shouts stemmed from a throng of humans by the main entrance, who were barely kept at bay by armored UN personnel. Those soldiers seemed to have been shipped by the truckload, in a hurry. Judging by the signs and vulgar language, the gathered refugees were protesting Elias Meier's arrival.

I heard about this gathering, since its organizers did apply for and receive a legal permit. However, the Terran demonstrators had moved away from the designated area in the wake of the attack. Some were pushing toward the scene of the blast, though I had no idea whether it was to help or to finish off the survivors. Others were escalating to violence, charging at the UN officers and throwing objects. What chance would Venlil police have of containing these animals?

A few predators were setting fire to glass bottles, then hurling them at their surroundings. Historic rowhouses lit up like kindling, once the picturesque shutters were swallowed by flames. Before my eyes, the Terrans climbed up the hood of a UN vehicle, and began swinging a bat at the windshield. Surely these humans realized that didn't accomplish anything? It was terrifying to see their destruction spiraling out of control; this violence must not be as isolated of an incident as I hoped.

"I thought you were an intelligent species. What is this?!" I cried.

My shriek drew the attention of the mob, who began jeering at Meier in particular. Several lobbed accusations about Earth, and they overran the UN crowd control with renewed focus. Rocks, bricks, and other blunt objects were thrown with intent to injure; Noah herded me off with a rough grip. I hadn't felt this terrified of humans since first contact. I had no idea what motivated these *creatures*, or if they could even be reasoned with at all.

As much as I loved the first contact team, allowing Terran refugees onto Venlil Prime was a mistake. We were going to have to get the current populace off-world, if they would still heed our commands at all. I would warn my advisors to implement stringent psych

evaluations for any arriving humans. This was wholly unacceptable. These predators here had no care for who they might hurt, and today's death toll had to be in the dozens.

I didn't want to judge humanity by their worst individuals. People like Meier and Noah did not deserve to die for their deranged cohorts; blanket condemnation was not the answer. But the Venlil Republic just learned the hard way that we needed to be more selective in which predators we dealt with.

Meier's eyes darted around. "We're going to restore order and fix this, Tarva. I'm so sorry."

"Bad things happen when a lot of angry humans get together. This will pass, love," Noah said.

Glass shattered inches from my heels, and my flight instincts bubbled back to the forefront. Coupled with the given adrenaline, I found myself running at full speed. The screeching sound of tires on asphalt met my ears. A black sedan careened down the narrow streets, with no regard for any protestors in the path. The crowd parted at the last minute, raving and discombobulated.

The Secretary-General pointed toward the car. "Run, get in!"

This vehicle had an actual driver, who seemed to be switching between autopilot and manual steering. They popped open the side door, leaving our posse to clear the final few feet. I prayed that we would be able to escape from these beasts. This was what it felt like to be hunted by pack predators, and there was no hope of humans tiring from the chase.

Noah positioned his body behind me, and shielded me from the projectiles sailing at us. A broken bottle nailed Meier in the back of the head, which earned cheers from the crowd. Another human protestor wrested a gun away from a UN peacekeeper; they began firing at the figurehead's center of mass, without hesitation.

The UN leader clutched at his abdomen, and staggered toward the car. He dumped the Sivkit over the threshold, somehow maintaining his grip. The elder human collapsed in a splayed position, which suggested the concerning severity of his injuries. I prayed to any deity listening that nothing had connected with my astronaut.

Noah gave me a forceful push to the shoulders, sending me

tumbling into the backseat. He dove in on top of me, and tugged the door shut. The driver floored it away from the mob at max velocity. The Terran ambassador sighed in relief, before he turned his eyes to the Secretary-General. Multiple bullets had pierced through his stomach, and the leader was gasping like a fish out of water.

Blood was oozing onto the floorboards, draining away with a steady flow. I realized with dismay that Meier might need hospital care more urgently than me. It took a second to roll him over, so that I could stare into his dazed eyes. The human tried to sit up, but fell back with a weak groan. My paw raced beneath his neck, and propped up his skull.

Elias' eyelids fluttered. "Tarva…Chief Hunter Isif wants to help us."

"Stop talking. That's not important right now," I said.

"It is. I want you to make peace with the Arxur. Please, let…that be my legacy."

The primate drew a shaky breath, and cued in on the hesitancy in my eyes. I didn't want to argue with a man who was fading in my arms; it was obvious he wanted those negotiations to work, at any cost. Perhaps it was true that Isif aimed to help humanity, the only other predators in the galaxy. But that gray had outright stated that Venlil were lesser animals, a "delicacy" that he felt entitled to. That wasn't an open invitation to civil relations.

"What Isif said to you was theatrics. So he wouldn't be executed," Meier coughed. "He wants…to end sapient farming and the war. Need…better future. Likes your spirit. Told me so."

I blinked several times. "And you trust i—er, him?"

"Why…would…lie? At his mercy."

Meier's eyelids sealed shut, as his irises rolled back in his head. Noah pried a packet of human blood from the glovebox, and began feeding it into the Secretary-General's veins. The vehicle was less than a minute from the hospital, but every millisecond seemed like an eternity. My own weakness was creeping back in, while the UN leader's breathing grew more faint.

I didn't know if I could honor that request, despite Elias framing it as a last wish. As much as I respected his discernment, the likeliest answer was that the Arxur hunter was manipulating human

empathy. Isif knew the Venlil Republic wanted nothing to do with him; his species had enjoyed every second of the war. Even if the Federation *had* starved the grays, they used that as a free pass to slaughter everyone without exception.

The tires squealed, and we veered over to the hospital's entrance. Squeaky voices alerted the other staff that an injured predator was on-site, followed by recognition of this particular human. My mind was far away, when Noah placed me onto a stretcher. Unconsciousness took hold, as Venlil paramedics rushed two planetary leaders to critical care.

Chapter 64

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 22, 2136

The line between dream and consciousness grew blurry; I slipped between waking moments in delirium. Whatever drugs I was given seemed designed to keep me out of it, but there were brief flashes of humans putting my wing back into place. Rumbling voices cascaded around me, and filled me with the urge to claw my way to the surface. The vivid dreams left my brain in anguish. My near-death experience had turned decades of rotten memories into a jumbled casserole.

There had been one nightmarish case where we found an elderly Krakotl, ripped apart in her backyard. With a cruel sense of humor, my dream state decided to re-enact the scene. Standing over the rotting corpse, and seeing the innards tugged from her stomach, was the abyssal image of evil. Extermination officers were supposed to act in time to prevent these occurrences.

I could feel a sour taste swell in my beak. It was followed by a scorching sensation, as I regurgitated my meager lunch. My partners insisted on immediately torching the area; this body was defiled beyond burial salvaging. The victim's family would understand. Some faint remembrance told me that this was the case that made me transfer to the military.

We never found the predator. I looked…obsessed…ran down every lead.

"Over here!" a voice hissed on the wind.

My wings flapped with urgency, and I sailed off in the direction of the call. All I wanted was to fry the animal that would commit this heinous deed. This had been the only predator I ever hated; my standard practice was to refrain from emotional judgments. It wasn't a hunter's fault for being born, but the existence of whatever did this was offensive to me as the Arxur.

The scenery blended together with that dreamlike passage of time; the abrupt change wasn't jarring in the moment. Without warning, I was buffeted down by a brutal gust of wind. The forest clearing around me looked quite familiar, and my instincts screamed that

something wasn't right. There was a neon fabric dome, a sapient-built structure which tickled something in my mind.

Invisible forces tugged the entrance flap open, as though inviting me in. I inched closer, despite wanting to back away, on legs that felt like concrete pylons. Violet Krakotl blood formed a thin trail across the grass, which returned a sliver of my resolve. A predator like this could not be allowed to reproduce under any circumstances. The bravado it had, to waltz into our settlements, meant it was a true abomination.

My eyes were not prepared for the sight that awaited. Inside, there crouched a lanky, brown-skinned creature, which I recognized as an adult human. The predator was chowing down on a Krakotl's gullet, and blood was smeared on its chin. How had an alien sapient gotten out here?

It looked up as I entered, with feathers jammed between bloodied canines. Those brown eyes, with that awful pleading quality still present, belonged to Arjun. This must be that kid, all grown up, and now as ugly as the rest of his freakish race.

"Humans are not vicious," Arjun whined, in the childish register that didn't match its development. "You're brainwashed, Kalsim!"

I tried to raise my flamethrower, but my wings wouldn't move. The predator bared its teeth, inching closer. I should've killed that conniving demon while I had the chance. It didn't matter that humans were capable of empathy, when it was a selective concept that could be turned off like a light switch. What a curse, to be given the gift of sapience, yet to have such an atrocious form…

The hideous monster sprang forward. Its unrivaled endurance meant that its bloodlust would never be sated. Any compassion was overridden by an instinct much stronger; that was what their history told us would happen, all along. The Federation needed to kill as many humans as possible, but I had forgotten that. Its clawless fingers pressed into my throat, and all I could hear was the pounding of my heart.

"I'm going to kill you!" I shrieked, snapping upright. "SAVAGES!"

My head spun, and I realized I was in a ventilated building. The cool metal beneath my spine suggested I was on some sort of operating table; at least, I hoped that was what the tiny knives were

for. My wing was bound in some sort of plaster, and gauze was wrapped around my aching neck. This must be somewhere amidst the predator-infested lands of Earth.

The realization that it was a dream provided immeasurable relief. Thinking about the details, it was a senseless nightmare. Social hunters wouldn't wander and pick us off alone. Still, I couldn't help feeling uneasy at that peek of the future. It was tough to picture the human kid devolving, and encroaching on Federation worlds with his brethren.

I slid my talons off the table, clicking around on wobbly feet. Why had Arjun's father listened to its son's plea to spare me? Weren't the primates furious about the cities we destroyed?

Arjun didn't deserve to suffer, but maybe I should've put him down. If I knew humans were such brutal hunters, their compassion wouldn't have swayed me. Those drawn-out methods are far worse than the Arxur's.

With a bit of hesitancy, I tested the door handle; it was unlocked. The humans kept their structures more sanitary than I expected, from creatures accustomed to constant blood and death. There wasn't any reek of predation, or biological markers left to intimidate me. Perhaps the Terrans realized I showed mercy to their kind, and stayed their hand? They were a cogent species, not the non-sapient terror I saw in my nightmare.

Still, I felt like I should be bound or caged. Maybe the primates were testing whether I could be enslaved? That was the only reason I could fathom why they'd patched me up. Thoughts of Thyon, the only surviving member of my party, raced through my mind. It begged the question of how long I'd been out, and whether that 'MARCOS' faction had sniped him.

As I turned into a wider area, a gun was jabbed inches from my face. An adult human watched with a neutral expression, but I could see the hunger that lurked in those pupils. The alien predator looked like the result of a disastrous lab experiment, with its exposed face and glistening skin. I felt sorry for the prey races like the snake, that had to deal with these things marching around.

"What was that noise? You're going to kill me?" Its eyes glowed in the middling light, and its dry lips tensed. That must be a cue that it wanted blood to wet them. "I encourage you to try, bird."

I squeezed my eyes shut. “W-was…n-nightmare. T-there’s…no point to k-killing you now. We failed.”

“Kalsim thinks we’re going to conquer them, Dad,” Arjun offered from atop a footstool.

“Well, I don’t think we’ll have the chance, kiddo. The grays beat us to the punch, or so I hear.”

Solemnness clasped my heart, as I thought of the undefended Nishtal. The Arxur wouldn’t pass up a golden opportunity, if it was brought to their attention. There hadn’t been time to dwell on the reptiles’ arrival at Earth, but it told us a lot about the humans. The fact that the Terrans were a feeling people, who cared for each other, hadn’t stopped them from jumping in bed with their antithesis.

“You are dangerous, and still I have shown you mercy, time and again. My home is gone. Do what you think you must, human,” I grumbled.

The father peeled back its plump lip. “The name’s Manoj. You have a sick idea of mercy, but my son is alive because of you. That’s the only reason I’m not ending you myself, got it?”

“I see. It is difficult to look a sapient in the eye and kill it…Manoj. Even for one of your spawn. What happens to me doesn’t matter; I won’t resist the execution squad.”

“C’mon, *resist* a little. I got wildlife doctors to treat you and your pal, with some reluctance. They gave in eventually, on the condition that I turn you over to UN forces once you’re stable.”

“Wait. My pal?”

“Arjun told me where to find him…pure genius hiding spot. Look under the bedsheet, behind me.”

The full-grown human was positioned just right to obstruct my vision. On closer inspection, the tubes and wires behind the predator were attached to the Farsul officer. Horror coursed through my veins; Thyon was missing an arm. The jagged edges around his shoulder stump suggested teeth had sawed it off. Manoj must’ve gotten too hungry around the injured officer, and experienced a lapse in its control.

I know it must tough for a predator to stitch together a wounded prey

animal, who was in a coma…but my gosh.

"You ate Thyon?!" I checked both of my wings in a squawking panic. The human scalpels could've shaved off tiny flesh bits, in fractions that I hadn't noticed. "You're just like the Arxur!"

Manoj snorted. "Damn, you're a fucking idiot. Human teeth aren't big enough, certainly not to do *that* so cleanly."

"That…yes, you're right, predator. Then you fed him to the tigers, I suppose?"

"Actually, it was leopards that got him. Same family as tigers, but with spots instead of stripes. Would've had nothing left but crumbs, except that I showed up when it was picking at him. Arjun was upset about it, else I would've let nature run its course."

"You're lying. We placed him in a tree; there's no way land predators could've gotten to him!"

Manoj pulled up a clip on its holopad, with a snarl borne of cruel amusement. The human set the device down on a table, and I leaned over it hesitantly. A massive beast with a mottled pelt was walking up a vertical trunk, defying gravity with ease. Sinister forepaws hugged the bark's circumference, while its hindlegs moved like it was ascending ladder rungs.

The predator's speed quickened without warning, and its hindlegs pushed off. It leapt onto a branch in an adjacent tree, faster than any land-walker should be able to. I suppose these leopards were more than capable of scaling greenery in a blink. The only reason I could conjure why the Terrans kept such a beast alive, was their arboreal roots. That aerial terrorization might be relatable to them. Manoj had shown me that they were quite willing to scale forest trunks themselves.

The tiger reserve makes sense now. The humans respect this family of animals, because they recognize the bestial common ground.

The adult predator leaned back. "So, we reduced the drugs keeping Thyon in a medically induced coma. He's already starting to stir… this should be good."

"I assumed you would want revenge, Manoj, and I know it's just how humans are. But please, take it out on me. I gave the orders, I deserve your wrath. All Thyon wanted was to stop predators from hitting any more worlds. He couldn't sleep at night, knowing there

was another Arxur out there."

"We're not the Arxur."

"Nobody understands that but me. I always saw your redemptive qualities, and how unique humans were. I wish that was enough… we both know co-existence wasn't an option. I'm sorry that it had to be like this, truly."

"It didn't have to be like this at all. We wanted peace, to fight alongside you…and you committed genocide against us for it."

"I wonder if there could have been another way. Human conquest is as inevitable as your growth. There are no future generations, for any other race, with you alive."

The human's scowl was growing more visceral by the second. I wondered if it was reconsidering its promise to Arjun to spare me. My exterminator training faltered, as its narrowed eyes bore into my skull. A fearful squawk bubbled in my throat, but I fought to ground myself. Beneath its anger, pain manifested in its increasingly hostile posture. The skin of its hands was tight around the bone knobs, which suggested waning control.

My thoughts wandered to how Arjun had appealed to my morality, and claimed Terran religions called for natural compassion. I reminded myself that those emotions were genuine; they didn't just disappear at adulthood. This father, monstrous as it was, resisted murderous urges in favor of its bond with its son. Perhaps if I appealed to that side, and continued to treat this ghastly beast with dignity, I could save Thyon.

"Extermination officer is a dangerous job, where you're always on call. Not good for settling down, so I never had kids," I stammered. "I have killed a lot more living beings than I like to recall. But I have to believe that somewhere, for how we slowed Earth's expansion, there's a hatching who will live to adulthood."

A low rumble emanated from Manoj. "There's millions of children, on both worlds, who are dead *right now* because you tried to kill us. All for our eye placement?!"

"Human, your eye placement is a symptom of a bigger problem. Predators do have forward-facing eyes, but it's much deeper than that. That's like saying a virus must be eradicated for its spike proteins…its actions, the infection and spread, are the issue."

The adult human adjusted a rectangular object, which appeared to be a video camera. A red light blinked by the lens, and I guessed I was being recorded. That was a sensible action for intelligence purposes. Manoj bared its yellowed teeth, approaching me with shuffling steps. It traced an oily finger across my beak with a chuckle, before pointing my nose toward the camera.

“Say hello to the people of planet Earth,” the predator sneered. “You’re being broadcasted to social media right now, wherever the internet still functions. Look the eventual millions who’ll see this in the eye, and repeat your little virus line.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “You’re angry. I don’t hate humans for what they are. It wasn’t personal, it’s just the reality of the situation.”

“It sure felt personal, drumstick. I happened to find footage floating around from the UN raids: a Krakotl transmission sent to a downed ship. Those pink markings on this fella’s beak look awful similar to yours, don’t they?”

The Terran pulled up another video on its holopad. I recognized my own visage on the feed. An allied ship must’ve intercepted the hail we sent to the downed human, who had shown us a picture of its family. Pity swelled in my throat, as I thought of the offspring in its image. Those three primates had looked younger than Arjun, and now were left without a parent. For all I knew, they died in the bombings, and that UN pilot had sacrificed itself in vain.

“*Surrender yourself to our custody, peacefully, and I’ll see that you survive.*” *The cadence of my voice was overlaid by static interference.* “*You can ensure that your culture is remembered.*”

Manoj offered a chilling grin, its alien features giving off contradicting signals. “That’s your mercy, Kalsim? A perfect view of the destruction of your planet, your culture, and everyone you cared about. Meanwhile, you’re a prisoner among people who want your kind exterminated, forever. An exhibit in a twisted museum.”

“I wanted someone to study your culture. I wanted you to be remembered.”

“Fuck you. We could execute you, and that decision won’t be up to me. But my suggestion, people of Earth? Let’s give him the same ‘mercy’ he offered one of ours. Let him witness the destruction of

Nishtal in HD, while we keep him locked up…to document Krakotl culture."

My eyes shifted to the floor. There was never such an undercurrent of cruelty in my offerings. I had been trying to minimize their suffering, while Manoj aimed to twist the knife. Krakotl culture was well-documented by every Federation race, so it was not in jeopardy of vanishing from the records. There was no point to that existence! The humans viewing this video would demand a more violent end for me, wouldn't they?

A motor revved outside the compound, and predatory shouts rippled through the air. Those must be the UN soldiers picking me up. I shot a final glance at Arjun, who was watching me with interest. The human kid raised a clawless hand as we locked eyes. Perhaps this was some gesture of farewell, like the tail signals of many species.

The foresight of Arjun as a human adult floated through my mind again. I doubted I would ever see him again, but if I did, he would be something unrecognizable. These creatures grew out of the tolerable phase much too quick. Fighting off tears, I lifted my uninjured wing at him. The explosive noise of a door flying off its hinges pierced the air; Terrans couldn't do anything quietly.

"Good-bye, little predator," I whispered. "Don't go scaring any more snakes."

Dark fabric enveloped my head before I knew what was happening. Pure terror coursed through my veins, at the sheer number of humans I sensed around me. This was the largest concentration of predators I'd dealt with in my life. Part of me hoped that they would take me as a meal, instead of skewing my mercy into a revenge fantasy.

Chapter 65

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 23, 2136

By my assessment, the humans' shuttle was barely FTL-worthy; it would be lucky to defeat a solar sail in combat. I was certain their craft choice was designed to tail me with minimal risk of detection. Now, it wasn't like I was going to forget they were on my tail, so I didn't see the point of stealthy monitorization. With Carlos requiring medical oversight, we persuaded the predators to dock with us.

The Terran shuttle squeezed into the escape pod bay, with little room to spare. The Harchen journalists were floored to see the accommodations the Terrans had whipped up for the deaf Talpin. I imagined the Federation would be shocked as well; there was a reason the humans chose these Gojids to represent our refugees. That painted a different picture of the cradle invasion, apart from the story of vicious annihilation circulating now.

Samantha and Carlos were still unwilling to land on Aafa in person, after their ambassador was 'held hostage' for weeks. I'm sure the attempted murder wasn't an enticement either; my guards valued staying in one piece. My expectation was that the humans would detach in their shuttle, once we got close enough. Their little clunker would either hide out until our hopeful return, or they would find their own way back. My read was that they weren't eager to stay around the Federation hub.

I know what I'm going to tell the representatives about the humans. But I don't know how to justify my own actions, with Marcel.

The low hum of the ship's engines pulsed into my paws, as I slunk around the humans' personal effects. Samantha had left an unlocked holopad unattended, and I was gripped by the compulsion to scour their internet. We wouldn't have access to the live network, hundreds of star systems away from Sol, but there was an archive of what existed before our departure. The guilt drumming away in my skull wondered what the Federation was told about Marcel.

I breathed the words aloud, as I typed in a search bar. "Marcel,

human tortured by Gojid."

My heart seized, scrolling through the results that turned up. After everything I had learned about the Terrans, it made my sins even more terrible. The thought that a predator could share such similarities with us, and that they could truly be our friends, had been fantastical at the time. Why had I not even considered, for a second, that the human captive was innocent?

I tapped a video result that claimed to have been shown to the Federation. My claws landed themselves in my mouth, and I chewed with more intensity than ever. Marcel was feeding a prey animal, while a speaker called "Noah" elaborated on his veterinary aspirations. It was tough to see the life in his hazel irises, the same ones I had seen pleading with me in agony. How could I ever come to terms with the fact that I tormented an herbivore human, who found his joy through saving animals?

The images switched to close-up images of Marcel's wounds. It broke my heart to see how famished the human looked, and to think about his misery. Tears swelled in my eyes, and mucus oozed from my nose. A few choking sobs came out, as the full weight of self-hatred slammed down on me again. Samantha had been right, when she told Carlos I didn't deserve cordiality.

A clawless hand swiped the holopad away from me. "Dear God, Sovlin. Why would you do that to yourself?"

"Sam, that's not the worst thing he could've sought out on the internet. Perhaps we should be happy," Carlos chimed in.

I jumped out of the chair, wiping my eyes on the back of my paw. Samantha's auburn hair looked disheveled, and my woefulness transitioned to concern. I hadn't seen the female eat anything, which was compounding a lack of self-care and sleep. The reason why she was grief-stricken was obvious now. We had to be certain she wouldn't make any hasty decisions, with such a tenuous mental state.

"W-what…is the worst thing, Carlos? Predation? Xenophobia?" I asked.

The male guard snorted. "No. Forget about it. You're going to give the holopad back to Sam, and promise never to tinker with our things again."

“Sorry, I needed to remember what I’ve done. I was starting to feel…almost normal, with you and the Harchen. It felt like I was with my old crew, but that life is gone. I don’t deserve happiness.”

“It’s time to move on, Sovlin.” Samantha showed a rare hint of sympathy, curling her lips in a way that didn’t seem hostile. The female predator looked lethargic and downcast. “You can honor Marcel by doing something good when you land on Aafa today.”

“But I—”

“You fucked up, bad. That was then, and this is now. I’ve decided that there’s something worthwhile in you, and so has the UN. You have no right to let us down.”

My paws relinquished my grip on the holopad, and I allowed the alien hunters to steer me out to the common area. Somehow, Samantha’s rough words were comforting. She reminded me I had a purpose here far beyond myself. Every living creature on this side of the galaxy, Slanek, Marcel, my guards, the Gojid refugees, was depending on me.

The entire Federation would be disbanded and slaughtered, if I didn’t disprove the Arxurs’ deceit with conclusive evidence. It would be a travesty for them to flip the script, and masquerade as the original ‘victims’ in this mess. Whatever my past failings were, penance wasn’t as important as stopping the humans from forging this unholy alliance.

I need to save the Terrans from vengeful temptation. The species who liberated a cattle ship, and bashed Arxur prisoners over the head, is still in there.

Finding justice for my first officer’s death was an urgent consideration too. Recel lost his life, per the humans’ dossier, after helping Marcel escape my clutches. The Kolshian Commonwealth had proved themselves a menace to the Federation, and our forums of diplomacy. Someone needed to put an end to their treachery, before more innocents turned up dead. This was personal to me now, and I wanted to see the masterminds hang.

The Harchen journalists were dotted across the common area, with scribbles and notes strewn everywhere. Cilany looked concerned, as she noticed my sniffling and bleary eyes. I knew the journalists were worried the predators were intimidating me, or throwing their

weight around. It was all I could do to delay any interrogation of Samantha, with her fragile state. The humans needed to talk over their history soon, unless they wanted it covered in an unfavorable light.

“Cilany, has your team located any pertinent information?” I asked.

The short reptile drummed her toes on a table. “If I give you the rundown, are the predators finally going to answer my questions?”

Samantha bared her teeth. “You’re not in any position of power here. This is our mission, and I’m not your lab rat.”

“Your…what? The translator mangled that idiom. A rodent in a lab?” I repeated.

“For animal testing. To develop drugs, or research behaviors.”

Every prey sapient in the room gaped at the primate, and even I failed to mask my horror. Humans ran unethical experimentation on captured animals, treating them like expendable subjects? That was not an empathetic practice; there was no defense for wide-scale cruelty. It was implied that there were no safeguards to mitigate the suffering, either.

“Okay, all of you, quit it with *that* look!” Carlos leapt to Samantha’s rescue, rounding on me with a glare. “How else do you develop medicines to cure diseases, and uncover the side effects *before* giving it to your own people?”

“Cell cultures, Harchen tissue samples, microdosing, and computer models. Murder-free,” Cilany said.

My spines bristled from the predators’ anger. “L-like any civilized culture. We don’t treat animals as our toys.”

The female guard bit her lip. “Human…no, sapient lives take precedence over everything else. I’d sacrifice a million animals to save one person…person I…”

As much as I wanted to push back against Sam’s statement, it was tough to argue with someone who looked so broken. If I believed it was my only option, there were no sacrifices I wouldn’t make to bring back my family. Humans rushing disease cures might have come to the same conclusions. I tucked away a mental note to give the predators some simulations that could put an end to that barbarism.

The Harchen reporter blinked in disgust. “There are better ways! That’s not science.”

“On the plus side, at least the humans do try to heal their people,” I told Cilany. “When I first captured Marcel, I didn’t even think they had medicine. He moved away from my sedative needle, like he was scared of doctors.”

Carlos slapped his forehead. “Sovlin, maybe we just don’t like needles? Between the sight of blood and the pain, it’s not a carnival ride.”

“Sorry…we’re off to a terrible start. I don’t see why these reporters can’t get along with you. Work this out, for your sake. This is your chance to justify yourselves to the galaxy, humans.”

“We’ve done nothing to you! Why do we need to justify anything?” Samantha spat.

“I know you don’t want to, but it’s about time someone listened to your side of the story. Don’t you think? There’s a lot at stake here, especially if more races decide to come after you.”

The two predators shared a glance, as the Harchen scrutinized their mannerisms. They both gave a grudging nod, and settled down into their seats. I offered a silent prayer that Cilany would go gentle on Samantha. If I saw that human showing signs of distress or a breakdown, I was going to intervene. Her welfare was more important than any media coverage.

“You first, Cilany,” Carlos growled.

“The Federation d-dumped a lot of footage from their initial discovery of humanity, to undermine Noah’s message.” The reptile’s skin camouflaged with the blue ship walls, as the predators leaned toward her. She was brave, to face them so early on. “I found a clip from their discussion…that unanimous vote to destroy your species, almost two centuries ago. Look.”

The male guard knitted his brow in confusion. I could sense him biting back a retort, since that wasn’t the information the UN was looking for. Part of him must be curious to observe how humanity had been discussed as heartless monsters. If the Gojids had been sentenced to death before escaping our world, I’d want to hear those proceedings.

The Harchen reporter tossed a video onto a projector, and my own

eyes turned to the screen. I'd never seen this footage. Humanity had been little more than a historical footnote, with a few graduates like Zarn diving into the Federation's observations. Why had the vote passed without a single objection? What could be that terrible?

A Venlil male spoke at his station. "T-those monsters are our neighbors. If FTL ever f-falls into their lap, we'll be the first ones dead! It won't be your species turned to carrion! Hurry up and k-kill them all!"

"Governor Mulnek is correct. From what we've seen, humans are barely sapient. True sapients don't develop the weapons they have; chemicals, diseases, bombs, even early satellites," the Farsul representative added.

"Thank you, Ambassador Royon. Can you picture those savage apes making it a day in the Federation? They'd eat us, the first chance they get. I shudder to think of Venlil coming across those…things."

Anger returned to Samantha's gaze, and her hands curled up into a fist. Knowing how close human-Venlil relations had become, I could imagine the damage this footage would do. At least, to my knowledge, Governor Tarva had been forthcoming with the United Nations on her species' role in that era. It wasn't her doing, so the Terrans shouldn't have a gripe with her.

The Venlil pushed everyone away to save the predator scientists. It makes me wonder what that first contact team said, to make Tarva walk back her distress signal. To renounce her species' stance.

Carlos threw his hands in the air. "Even the Venlil spewed that vitriol?"

"Hurry up and kill them all? Savage apes?" Samantha echoed.

"Quit pouting, and listen. This is the important part," the Harchen reporter hissed.

Royon tossed her head, on screen. "The humans have a lot in common with you-know-who. We once believed that predators can have feelings, but we learned that lesson the hard way. The Arxur faked plenty of things, from artistry to passivity. We saw how trying to make them one of us turned out."

Cilany paused the feed. "Did you catch that? The historian species of the Federation, claims the Arxur faked feelings. Given the context, that implies they showed signs of emotional intelligence,

before first contact. I mean, the Arxur had artwork?!"

"The last part was what caught my attention. I don't like the way they said 'make them one of us,'" Samantha growled.

The humans were much too eager to spin everything into evidence for the Arxur's tale. I understood why they resented the Federation, as Carlos put in perspective long ago. The way those ancient leaders spoke about the predators made my skin crawl. I hoped it hadn't been so flagrant, when this Noah figure came to them. All the same, the Terran guards were reading too much into one sentence from a stressed diplomat.

"It's referencing the Federation's uplift of the Arxur. We tried to welcome them into the galaxy, and that started this mess!" I spat.

Samantha glared at me. "Then why did they say 'one of us'? That meant turning them into prey!"

"I don't have enough evidence to reach a determination," Cilany sighed. "It is difficult to unearth much footage from the Arxur era. I really don't understand how records can be lost, in the digital age."

"Someone has something to hide. Judging by this dialogue, it's become more and more distorted over the years."

Carlos bobbed his head. "The people who voted to kill us were much more informed about the war's origins. That's useful to know. Good work, Cilany."

My spines bristled with irritation, as I realized the Harchen reporter wasn't challenging the premise at all. This must be some misguided efforts at appeasement; she didn't understand that the Terrans weren't looking for a lackey. This endeavor was too important to insinuate that the Arxur were angelic victims. Creative ability surprised me, but I was certain what passed for 'art' in their culture were war photos and hunting manuals. They were a sociopathic species to the core, and that was a well-documented fact.

"We uphold our bargains, Harchen," Samantha offered. "To be honest, I'm surprised that you're taking this seriously. I'll let you ask us one thing about humanity, but tone down the racism?"

The reporter flicked her tongue. "I want to know about your species' heroes…your collective dreams…your moral codes. How did they start, and are they universal? Do humans disagree on ethical issues? Uh…that's not one question, sorry."

Surprise flashed in both of the predators' eyes, and I noticed their postures relax. Carlos studied Cilany with newfound interest, perhaps reassessing her journalistic acumen. Her query was a question I was interested in myself. If I read the cues right, Terrans possessed an internal conscience, and could use it to steer their worst instincts.

Samantha leaned back, crossing her legs. "I'll answer as much about that subject as you want. Thank you, for taking an interest in the real humanity."

"Tell her about your international laws," I interjected. "Humans have codified rights, even for criminals like me. They let a hospital ship pass to save active enemies, when I fought them at our border outposts."

Carlos bared his teeth. "That's not an awful idea, for once, Sovlin. For all that talk about warfare, we've built rules signed by every modern nation, to prohibit attacks on civilian populations. To ensure that combatants receive humane treatment."

"Rights the Federation denied us," Samantha noted.

"You could sum up human morality in one statement; we call it the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you wish to be done unto you."

The Harchen reporter palmed her chin in thought. Traces of fear lingered in her gaze, but I could tell she was listening to their words. That was a lot more than most people would attempt. I'm glad that I was right about her giving them an honest shot.

Cilany squinted at the duo. "Does that still apply?"

"To anyone willing to return the courtesy, sure. But humanity isn't itching to be the galaxy's punching bag," Samantha replied. "The Federation broke that rule first."

"Sam, if I can call you that, the way we all have talked about you is terrible. The public discourse is hateful, and your personal losses resonate with me. I can't imagine what I'd do in your paws. My species was a part of that."

The female predator sniffled. "There's nothing any of us can do about that now. Let's talk about heroes, shall we? You might be interested in some ancient mythology…how early and modern humans made sense of the world."

Cilany hesitantly rose to her feet, and dragged her chair alongside the humans. I could see the tears swelling her eyes, alongside the acceleration of her breathing. Her slender arms were shaking, but she situated herself by the humans. She reached out with a trembling appendage, offering Samantha a tissue. The UN guard took it deftly, and dabbed at her eyes.

“I…I’d like that. Let me tell your stories,” the Harchen replied.

A glimmer of hope crept into those green eyes, reminding me of the humanity that came to the galaxy with righteous zeal. Those people were still in there, despite their heartache. I had to believe it was possible to mend our rifts, and to steer them from the path of destruction. Those lost on Earth couldn’t be brought back, but my predator friends didn’t have to die with them.

Samantha wove a yarn of supernatural fantasies, early scientists, and ambitious explorers seeking trade routes. Carlos added his own tales of monster slayers and fictional kings, with their own honor code. Terran legends sounded grandiose and heroic, from their lips. They elevated their greatest champions as guardians and pioneers, who advanced civilization at personal risk.

The contrast with the legacy of conquest and subjugation Zarn put forward was striking. The prey reptile shivered from prolonged exposure to humans, absorbing the descriptions of their early history. All it took was active listening, to keep the predators talking. I mused to myself that this was how it should have been; this was the peace that could have been reality.

Chapter 66

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 24, 2136

The human soldiers detached in their shuttle, well before we entered Kolshian territory. No doubt, the predators wanted to avoid being picked up by sensor readings. If patrol ships asked us to account for all detected lifeforms, it would be impossible to hide their presence. Our concerns were validated by the harsh reception we received on descent toward Aafa. Gunships sidled up to us at full speed, and relayed demands to power down our engines.

“Venlil vessel, you are not welcome on Federation grounds.” The Kolshian’s Chief Nikonus was broadcasting a hail on military frequencies, with a glare that rivaled human ferocity. “I let your beasts speak once, and that was an error on my part. The Gojid cradle, the Krakotl army, and dozens of worlds have perished because of that little misstep.”

I accepted the transmission, striking my serious pose. “This is Captain Sovlin from the Gojid attachment of the Federation fleet. I am here to request asylum for our refugees.”

“Do the humans think we’re idiots? There’s six other signatures on board, and you were a known predator prisoner.” Nikonus bobbed his indigo tentacles in irritation. “By law, Venlil visitors should be held as enemies of state, for raising arms against other prey races.”

I waved for the Harchen reporters to step into the field of view, while Talpin and Berna filtered in on my other side. The deaf Gojid wielded a device that could approximate subtitles, and was growing livid from the dialogue. He began punching away at his speech synthesizer, but I flicked my claws in warning. If the Kolshian Commonwealth realized our Terran-sympathizing alignment, there might not be an opportunity to land on Aafa. It was an uphill battle to convince them we were friendlies already.

You’d think this roll call would assuage their doubts, but they seem to be expecting predator trickery. News of the assault on Earth has reached the wider galaxy; they know the Venlil fought by humanity.

The tension was palpable, as my scans confirmed that the Kolshians

kept their weapons powered up. I had no idea if they'd deny us passage or attack us outright, since nobody had shown any concern for the suffering Gojids. The Federation had abandoned my people thus far; there had been no aid shipments or reinforcements at our borders. Not one friend would go toe-to-toe with either predator for us.

Anger bubbled inside my chest, but I pushed it down. "Search us all you want. I rescued these Harchen personnel from an Arxur attack; we have useful intelligence. You're adding to their trauma also, if you care."

"Hmph. What are they hiding on your ship then? Bombs? Bioweapons?" the Kolshian demanded.

I struggled to keep my voice steady. "The Venlil were able to secure my release, and move some Gojid refugees to their territories. I'll be happy to discuss the details before the Federation representatives… whoever is here, gracious Chief Nikonus."

"Let the Harchen speak. I recognize a renowned journalist when I see one, Cilany."

"I want to know about the Federation's response to this multilateral attack, and your plans to deal with these human predators," the journalist said, without hesitation. "Fahl is barely holding, and there's a refugee crisis brewing on your borders. The people want answers. My people want answers."

"That doesn't give you the right to barge in here without clearance. You're disrupting important proceedings!"

"This is important too, Chief Nikonus."

The Kolshian breathed a heavy sigh, brushing a tentacle across his forehead. These ship frequencies were often monitored by various media outlets, and I'd hope it'd still generate bad publicity if they turned non-Venlil away. Cilany and I felt that Nikonus owed us the truth, even if we entered his territory on false pretenses.

A trace of my former bravado flared in my chest. The old Captain Sovlin wouldn't have been turned away from a mission objective by anyone. I plotted in a landing course for the governance center, and ignored the target-lock icons on screen. We would be through Aafa's silky atmosphere long before Nikonus gave a kill order; nothing involving bureaucrats happened quickly.

“What are you doing, Sovlin? Have you lost your mind?” the Kolshian leader hissed.

“Fire away. You wouldn’t dare.” I chuckled, noting the irony. Those were the same words I told Tarva responding to her distress signal, right before the Venlil threw missiles in my face. “Shooting down asylum-seekers would have the wondrous consequence of raining debris on college students. I will speak my piece, and I don’t care if you like it.”

Nikonus’ bulbous eyes stretched wide. “Are you trying to start a war? This is rash and impulsive, unbecoming of a Federation officer.”

“What have I got to lose? My cradle is dead, and I’m one of the last survivors of a dying species. It’s time someone let us Gojids speak for ourselves; we don’t even get that courtesy.”

The Kolshian waved a tentacle in a dismissive gesture, and forwarded an open hangar location. It was all I could do to slow to a safe landing velocity. Berna and Talpin seemed terrified of my flying; the two of them had found their way back to their harnessed seats. Our ship ducked the spaceport overhang with an inch to spare. FTL traffic control gawked from the observation room, as I careened down while firing reverse thrusters.

Our massive ship slid into the docking port like a plug into a socket. Kolshian soldiers rushed across the terminal, flooding from the connector tunnel to the governance hall. They bore weapons designed to hamper any human predators that magically popped into existence, including heavy guns and strobe lights. I laughed to myself, appreciating how absurd this reaction was.

Perhaps these extermination officer wannabes will try to arrest me. I doubt they liked that stunt I pulled…but the humans would think it’s hilarious, I noted. *Protector, those predators get humor.*

The Kolshians rigged explosive charges by the exit hatch, before we could disembark of our own volition. They entered with gun muzzles ready, and hollered orders at all of us. My spines bristled at their intimidation, but the fear didn’t reach my brain. I struck a bored pose as they pressed a rifle to my temple, pushing it away with a light claw tap. Meanwhile, the Harchen reporters and Gojid refugees had dropped to the floor in terror.

“Your hospitality needs some work,” I remarked. “That’s no way to welcome guests.”

The Kolshian soldiers shared a glance, incredulous at my derangement. They swept every corner of our ship, including inside storage cabinets. Amusement flared up once more, as I thought about Carlos folded up like a suitcase to fit in a drawer half his size. Several glares latched onto me, and I was flung to the floor by a rough tentacle. It took an inordinate amount of time for their ‘thorough’ search, but our hosts became satisfied that humans weren’t lying in wait.

The Commonwealth guards waved to stand up, and ushered us out the door. The eight-sided landing pad had an array of stores and offices built into its walls. Flashing signs directed ambassadorial attachés to the governance hall, written in several languages (including the artificially-created ‘Common’, which was only used by pretentious diplomats). The general public were welcome to Federation proceedings as spectators, but they weren’t cleared to land here.

Media personnel hurried out from the connector tunnel, just as we cleared the terminal’s threshold. They seemed disappointed to find the unannounced arrival was a few Gojids and Harchen. Whatever an outlet’s stance on humanity, the ‘predators sell’ mantra was true. Journalists captured footage of us with our Kolshian escort, with a few calling Cilany and I by name. I avoided eye contact, and kept my lips sealed.

“Cilany, Harchen ambassador Raila will welcome you, to hear your report on Fahl.” A Kolshian soldier turned to me, radiating contempt. “She is in crucial talks with undecided Federation members now, so you need to show some patience, *Sovlin.*”

I kept a placid expression, though I knew our neutral faction could not turn on humanity. “Of course, we’ll wait outside until she’s ready. Would you show us there, please?”

The Kolshian beckoned with a cerulean tentacle, steering us through winding corridors. Our journey ventured away from the massive auditorium, where state business was conducted. Architects on Aafa seemed to derive joy from constructing floor plans that looked like mazes; it was a wonder we didn’t get lost. Perhaps a simpleton like me couldn’t understand “beauty”, but I wished the

humans would gut the whole place. Terran layouts were always neat and orderly.

We reached an escalator that transported us to a basement. A subway train waited for us, and whisked us below the street to the ambassadorial offices. I didn't understand why the diplomatic living arrangements were in the hall's premises, while the workspaces were separate. I suppose this was the only way to provide every species with spacious accommodations.

The Kolshian soldiers steered us into a lobby, once we arrived at the station. An elevator ride to the twelfth floor was the last step of our journey, and I yawned to express annoyance. Judging by the iconography of Inatala, with flowers in her beak, this must be the Krakotl's home. Closed doors sealed off a conference room, which I yearned to break into.

This is my chance to speak to the Federation; the ones that can still turn back. I have to impress the need to appease humanity.

I sprinted toward the meeting area, catching the Kolshians by surprise. A soldier placed a tentacle on my shoulder, and my spines extended further. In a flash of outrage, my claws scratched gashes into his soft skin. Cilany gasped at my violent assault, but I had no intention of waiting. This was too important to let some grunt stand in our way.

The Kolshians drew their guns, no doubt worried that the human predators had corrupted me. The Harchen reporter leapt in their path, and waved her arms to compensate for her short stature. I burst into the assembly; dozens of pupils darted in my direction.

Ambassador Jerulim squawked angrily. "What on Nishtal is this interruption? From the man who pushed the bleeding hearts into the humans' arms, because *poor Marcel.*"

"What Captain Sovlin did to that human was wholly cruel and unnecessary; whatever side of the aisle you're on," Chief Nikonus returned.

"It's a predator, just like *Noah* was. You traitors use their names, which is validating the whole premise of personhood. What's next: an Arxur speaker named Huggable?"

A female Mazic flared her trunk. "Noah is obviously a monster, even he realized that. But his arguments were sound. We don't have

the luxury of trusting our gut. Fret not Jerulim, everyone recognizes the image of evil when it's right in front of them."

"Do they? That's why you're the only allied race that came to this meeting?!"

Farsul ambassador Darq tossed her floppy ears. "They won't meet with you because you physically attacked anyone who sided with humanity last time."

"I've apologized for that…I'm willing to talk to everyone now, though you don't deserve it. What I did was the only sensible reaction to heresy!"

A clamor of voices rose in disharmony, leveling accusations and shouting conflicting views. I was horrified that these were our leaders; they had the emotional maturity of misbehaving children. The good news was that I didn't need to fake diplomatic aplomb. If talking the loudest was the only way to get through to them, that was right up my alley.

"I AM SPEAKING NOW!" My roar shook my vocal chords, as I leapt onto the table to draw attention. "Jerulim, I think your army is gone, so you have nothing to throw your weight around with. That's why you're talking."

The Krakotl ambassador craned his neck in irritation. "You have no right—"

"Protector, you make more senseless noise than a stampede! The undecided voters here, most notably the Sulean and Iftali Alliance, are likely leaning toward war with the humans. This is all based on the cradle's fall, but nobody here was actually there but me! Are the Gojids nothing more than a talking point to you, without our own voice? We served this Federation for six centuries!"

Chief Nikonus cleared his throat. "The Federation respects the contributions of the Gojidi Union, who worked tirelessly in our defense throughout this war. The Kolshian Commonwealth was saddened by the tragedy that befell your people. That said, we already got the details from Doctor Zarn of the Takkan Coalition; your doctor."

"Zarn? He said that all humans deserved to die from the moment we laid eyes on Marcel…much like the Krakotl ambassador with this Noah. What you need to know, is that Prime Minister Piri and I

saw empirical and irrefutable evidence that flipped our stance. My question is, does anyone care what really happened?"

"Of course we care. Go ahead, Captain," the Sulean observer interjected.

"The simple fact is, the humans never attacked a single civilian or even medical target. We were gearing up for an attack on Earth, so they took out our military capabilities to stop us. The Arxur took advantage of the lapse in fortification, and started bombing everything in sight. Terran military personnel risked their lives to evac our people."

Jerulim puffed out his chest. "The predators were just collecting their own cattle."

It didn't surprise me that the Federation assumed our refugees were livestock, but that was why Talpin was here. The Kolshian soldiers stood steadfast at the door, forming an organic wall between my posse and the diplomats. Hearing the Krakotl's claim, Berna barreled over a guard with a headbutt; her brother was close behind. Cilany slipped through the dazed soldiers, though the other Harchen journalists weren't as quick to act.

"Talpin is deaf, and he can attest that humans treat him with dignity. One of my guards had a deaf brother too; they don't discard their own like the Arxur," I retorted. "I thought I was going to suffer in Terran custody, but my victim claimed that 'wasn't who he was.' The UN gave me a second chance."

The Harchen ambassador, Raila, turned to Cilany. "Enough predator apologetics. Was Fahl holding?"

The reporter wiggled her toes. "Yes, but the Arxur claimed the raid was retribution for Earth. The humans seem to have them under some level of control. That can either be really good, or really bad."

"They're working together? Officially?" Jerulim shrieked. "I told you!"

I shook my head. "The Arxur are lying to the humans to gain their alliance, because they recognize their potential. I was on the bridge of a Terran warship when they returned, and took back the cradle. They won against an enemy we can't hold a candle to, with three months FTL experience and primitive ships. They boarded a cattle ship so methodically, that the grays *surrendered.*"

Disbelieving expressions swept across the room, at the thought of those raging monsters giving up mid-fight. Even Cilany had difficulty absorbing that tidbit. While it was common knowledge that Gojid territory had fallen to predators, the situation was more complex than that. That battle was the moment I recognized how well humanity could harness their instincts. They had better control on their neural wiring than any of us.

Cilany blinked. “Is that why the grays decided to honor humanity’s claim to Gojids? Respect?”

“I don’t know, or care, what goes through the minds of those savages. I care about the empathetic primates who eat fruit and have protective instincts. My Federation friends, don’t you understand the importance of appeasing humanity? You’re forcing a species much smarter and more tactical into the grays’ arms.”

Chief Nikonus leaned back. “Appeasement was always my plan, and people like Jerulim thought they knew better. Have the two predators wear each other down…then, it will be much easier to clean up the survivors. If they want to duke it out, why make them turn their guns on us?”

My jaw almost dropped to the floor. Using the humans to destroy the Arxur, then mopping up their remnants, was the cold, calculating idea I’d expect from a predator. The United Nations deserved to be shown genuine kindness; it was all I could do to keep my mouth shut. After cooperating through an alliance, these people would get attached to the Terrans eventually. There would be time to give the primates a proper warning, if they didn’t see through the façade from the start.

This might be the only way to save the Federation. I want humanity to survive, but I can’t feed every race in the galaxy to the grays to achieve that.

“The humans want to know where every race stands; that was their message,” I said. “Make your decision, and contact the United Nations. Well, those of you that haven’t already fucked your species over.”

Raila wiggled her toes in discomfort. “We joined the attack on Earth, and I can’t say I regret that. I regret that it failed.”

Cilany glared at the Harchen ambassador. “You should be ashamed

of yourself. Surrender unconditionally, and beg their forgiveness. We can't hold out if the grays send reinforcements…once they finish up with defenseless Nishtal."

"This is a wake-up call," I growled. "Nobody who openly opposed the humans has survived, assuming the 24 attackers fall to the Arxur. All that matters is that we survive, but it's your choice. Go with our last chance at survival…or push the predators into the grays' arms."

Agreement glittered in the eyes of the Kolshian chief, and a contemplative silence swept through the room. I hoped my argument was more compelling than the humans' vengeful demands. My trust in the Federation's decision-making was gone, where predators were involved. After decades of faithful service, this plea was a final effort to save the species I pledged to defend.

Chapter 67

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 24, 2136

The meeting in the Krakotl ambassador's office was adjourned, and would reconvene tomorrow morning. My arrival had disrupted the proceedings from reaching a consensus, but I was glad I had said my part. News took a long time to travel at interstellar distances, and the Federation representatives were making decisions based on outdated and incomplete information. With that step checked off, I could focus on acquiring the evidence of Arxur first contact.

It was peculiar that the records weren't publicly available, but the Arxur had engaged in planetwide wars. Documentation of such brutality could be traumatizing to watch, so it might be best kept under lock and key. Graphic content should be reserved for the highest-ranking officials; the general public didn't need to live with the full scope of their nightmarish deeds. How would the humans feel if people were traumatized by their own footage? Carlos and Sam should be more open-minded.

Chief Nikonus was one of the last to leave Jerulim's meeting, shooting daggers at the Krakotl ambassador. Supposedly, the avian had divebombed the Kolshian leader while he announced vote results. I was surprised that Krakotl Alliance personnel weren't removed from Federation activities, after not respecting member sovereignty. Their bullying methods were something I'd noticed for years.

The Krakotl were pioneers of all aggressive countermeasures we use. They were crucial to our war efforts, I reminded myself.

Kolshian soldiers crowded us as the leaders departed, and I wondered if we were bound for a cell. Trespassing charges could be levied against all of us, with some validity. My captain's rank was still active, to the best of my knowledge; disobeying orders could have me stripped of all credentials. Cilany didn't seem concerned by our insubordination, though. She was flagging down Nikonus as soon as he rose from his chair.

"I stand by my request for answers on the refugee crisis, Chief

Nikonus!" the Harchen reporter shouted. "The Federation's disagreement, and violence toward each other, has left people with no faith in their government."

The elderly Kolshian ambled toward the exit. "Am I to worry about the people's faith now?"

"Yes. It's a matter of time before someone, maybe at my publication, runs with the info I have. It would be extremely damaging to the Federation. Trust me, you need to sit down with me, if you want to maintain stability."

Nikonus paused. The reporter seemed to have struck a nerve with that last comment, and left him wondering what dirt she had on the Federation. He didn't know that much of it was silly speculation, combined with predator lies. I suppose he was thinking more about the killing of Federation diplomats, assuming that plot was government-backed.

"In my office. Go quietly," he decided.

The Kolshian guards shoved us forward on their leader's order, digging a rifle butt into my shoulder. I walked at a brisk pace for a few steps, then came to an abrupt halt. The soldier tailgating me cursed as he ran into my spines, and was left with prickle wounds all over his form. It was all I could do to stifle a chuckle; I could transport myself to the elevator without hovering grunts.

The lift descended to the lowest floor, which housed the original suite belonging to the Kolshians. The Commonwealth décor referenced their aquatic roots, with massive saltwater tanks lining the walls. Rows of seaweed were planted on the floor, while floating lilies formed the upper layer. I wondered what the humans would think of placing marine habitats indoors. They'd probably think it was as stupid as I did.

Nikonus signaled for his guards to stay outside, and he sealed the doors once we entered his office. Next came a polite tentacle gesture toward a sofa. I was happy to sit down after vaulting onto a table, and walking all across the governance complex.

Berna shared a glance with Talpin. "Humans are wonderful caretakers, Nikonus. They have nurturing instincts that rival our own."

"I'll skip the niceties. You two were brought here to sway votes, and

I have little time for mind games," the Chief said.

Talpin pounded away at his synthesizer. "Damn you! We want the Federation to offer us asylum. Why haven't you done anything for us?"

"The predators could've sent you to their friends, the Paltans; they take the most refugees of anyone in the galaxy. We would be happy to coordinate with them."

"The Paltans are on the opposite side of Federation space, and you know that. They're a month of travel time away!" Berna spat.

The Kolshian chief stood, and walked to the door with brisk strides. He whispered something to the guards, who dragged the refugees out by the arm. Outrage pumped through my blood, but I managed to keep silent. All they did was beseech Federation aid. It was sad when enemy predators had gone above and beyond to help us, and our allies thought us an inconvenience.

Nikonus settled back down behind his desk. "I will not be guilt-tripped into bringing human spies to live with us! Cilany, what is it that you think you know about the Federation?"

"I have witnesses who say that you gave the voters for diplomatic relations faulty ships. Forensic evidence confirms their tale," Cilany hissed. "You set out to kill Federation diplomats in cold blood, just for speaking with the predators. Furthermore, you made the Takkan representative disappear, because he saw your plot."

"Bold, yet foolish, accusations. A person who did such things could make you disappear too, my dear."

"If I don't contact my people within a few days, that story will be run as it is. Simply with the tagline; reporter vanishes after questioning Kolshian misconduct. A cover-up would confirm your guilt, but I want to help make this go away. You need Sovlin and I to protect the Federation's interests. You know we'd pick you all over those ugly predators."

Chief Nikonus scrunched up his face at the word ugly; perhaps he was wondering if we shared the same view of the furless Kolshians. But their aquatic skin was easy on the eyes, and they didn't have the paralyzing stereoscopic vision. The bizarre thing about humans was they had small patches of hair, in random places. Regardless, a Harchen individual wouldn't curl her lip at hairless beings, when

her race had no fur either.

We better hope Cilany's response makes him talk. She just gave our Kolshian host a good reason to dispose of us too.

"How much do you know?" Nikonus asked.

Cilany flicked her tongue in anticipation. "Everything. I know you deleted the first contact files from the records. The Arxur have emotional intelligence and artwork. The Federation saw those traits in humans, when we observed them the first time, but only recorded the negative attributes. I get that you wanted Recel dead for treason. Why didn't you just execute him and the Terran ambassador on Aafa?"

I waited for a denial to tumble from the Kolshian's mouth, but the troubled glint in his eyes worried me. His pupils darted toward the door, as though he was considering summoning the guards. Chills ran up my spines; there was something off about his reaction. Slander against the Federation should draw a vehement response.

Nikonus' bulbous eyes narrowed. "The people recognize me as a reasonable leader, who gave a predator the chance to speak. Gunning down a pleading representative, in front of cameras, makes people question our morality. The exact reason that what Sovlin did is a terrible look. Everyone said I was more than fair to Noah. I even fed and provided for the human."

Determination sparkled in Cilany's gaze. "You didn't fully answer my question. Also, why wait until the diplomats were out of Kolshian territory for the shuttle malfunction?"

"Out of sensor range. Everyone, including their governments, would assume the predator killed them. Nobody saw what happened, and the people don't need to know."

"Why not? Because you hate humans, and never intended for them to get a real chance?"

"I don't hate humans, but their diplomatic efforts cannot succeed. Look at the disaster that is the Venlil. How many civilians want to see humans attending our meetings; walking these grounds, living here? Also, our people would start asking questions about predators that we don't want them to ask."

Unease swirled around in my belly, as those last words registered with me. This Kolshian chief must be going senile in his old age.

Perhaps I was reading basic paranoia as something more, because the humans kept whispering theories in my ears.

Cilany palmed her chin. “Federation citizens shouldn’t ask questions about how first contact with the Arxur really went? We have it on good faith that you starved the grays to death.”

“You *must not* run that storyline!” the Chief hissed, leaping from his seat. “It would do irreparable damage to general morale…and it’s not the whole truth. You’re a good journalist, Cilany, not someone who lives on shock value. Any reporter worth their salt isn’t trying to disintegrate the Federation.”

Dizziness corkscrewed up my body, and I fought back the urge to scream. A ringing sensation drowned out all auditory signals; the tempest of emotions made me want to pass out. The shock was the strongest, as my mind began unraveling. The Kolshian bat couldn’t have just said what I heard. The Arxur were the ones who attacked us, because they were the Arxur!

My entire worldview was shattered in an instant. The anger over what happened to my family, knowing that the Federation were responsible…it was unspeakable. What I wanted to believe was that humans were unique predators, while the Arxur were demonic monsters. It was difficult to accept that my entire life was based on a lie.

Saying that the starvation tale wasn’t the whole truth, meant that it had some veracity to it. I hadn’t even been listening to what ‘Coth’ said during its interrogation, because an Arxur’s words didn’t matter. The only thing I cared about was if the humans had made it scream. The grays deserved to suffer for eating my family alive. Why couldn’t the damn Terrans see that?

“WHAT DID YOU DO?!” I charged across the desk at Nikonus, and my vision blurred from rage. My claws were by his throat before I knew it, pinning him against the chair. “You move an inch and I’ll tug your esophagus through your jawbone!”

The Kolshian blinked. “C-calm down. You are quite unstable, Sovlin; your monkey pals have done a number on you.”

“FUCK YOU! They’re not monkeys, any more than you’re an ectolan. It’s a distant evolutionary link, a term you use to desapientize them. Start talking your heart out, or I’ll carve you

up."

Cilany tugged at my arm. "Please stop; you're scaring me. Nikonus is cooperating. Don't you want to hear what he has to say?"

No, I don't. We came here to stop a human-Arxur alliance, not add fuel to the fire. Maybe we should cover this up, so our people survive.

"The Arxur say that you tried to make them allergic to meat." I took a deep breath, and backed away from the Kolshian. "I didn't understand what it was saying, but I think it meant they starve without flesh."

"You talked to a gray?" Nikonus' voice leapt up an octave, before he collected himself. "I'm disappointed in you, Sovlin. You used to be a good officer…now, you're a complete disgrace. Your family would be disgusted with the company you keep."

"You know *nothing* about my family. TALK, JUST FUCKING TALK, NOW!"

While my words were still charged with anger, conscious thought crept in. The logical side of me realized how dangerous it was to publish this. Whatever really happened, we were in a war of extinction; there couldn't afford to be any doubt. Narrative clarity is what gave the Federation conviction. Without it, we would start losing worlds faster than ever, and face divisions within our own ranks.

The Kolshian sighed. "There were three of us who laid out the groundwork for the Federation. When Kolshian explorers came in contact with the Farsul, more than a thousand years ago, the galaxy was young. We were the first in this sector to escape our gravity well. You know about the founding of this institution, but I reiterate it just in case."

"The Krakotl were the third," Cilany offered.

"Yes, they were a problem from the start; aggressive, disagreeable. We tried to identify the problem, and why they were so ill-equipped for spacefaring. We learned they were scavengers, who would occasionally go for fish as well. We were more level-headed because we're herbivores."

My jaw almost hit the floor, as I tried to digest this information. The Krakotl, a race I had cooperated with throughout my career, consumed meat a thousand years ago? It was tough to believe that

they'd hidden that fact from everyone else. Thinking of them as predators didn't compute in my brain. By the Protector, they had side-facing eyes…and a religion against flesh-eating beasts.

My endearment to the humans was all that stopped me from wanting the birds removed from the Federation. Flesh-eaters deserved a chance, and we had managed to coexist for centuries. I didn't understand what Nikonus' "scavenger" descriptor meant, but the Kolshians must've put an unholy amount of time into predator research.

"We gave them a choice: take our cure, or we would wipe them out with a bioweapon. It was an easy choice for them. We brought them to be re-educated in camps, and the new religions were the algae on the fruit mash. They *had* to hate predators, or they'd find a way to revert back."

Cilany bore an aghast expression. "You invented the Cult of Inatala?"

"Beliefs, religious or not, are the best way to control people. We planted fake archaeological texts, and rewrote their history. They've become a productive race. Harder to control now, but the cultural changes stuck. They have an enemy…a purpose."

"Do the Krakotl have any idea what was done to them?"

"The Krakotl don't know this, obviously…that would be cruel, Cilany. It's a closely-guarded secret of the highest-ranking Farsul and Kolshians. The process is down to a science, more subtle these days. We keep peace, and give grotesque races a chance at normalcy."

"Races? Plural?" I echoed.

A sadistic glint surfaced in his pupils, though it was gone a second later. Perhaps Nikonus sensed how much this narrative hurt me. I had no idea how to feel about the Krakotl being a "cured" race; it clearly hadn't ended their aggression, given their intimidation tactics. Still, it would be cruel for Jerulim to learn about this past.

"Yes, I'll get to that. We learned a hard lesson about giving full-on predator races the same chance; hunting and scavenging are different. Hunting, being an actual predator, means unchecked war and violence," he explained. "The grays *asked* us for help with their food problem, then refused to try herbivory. Their arrogance is why

they starved."

Cilany narrowed her eyes. "You also killed their cattle to be sure."

"They've shouted that one from the rooftops before. Blatantly untrue. We don't kill herbivore animals… we're not predators. That's just absurd!"

I swallowed in discomfort. "There's others in the Federation that used to eat meat? You said you'd get to that."

"Oh Sovlin, I already told you. For the small minority of species who don't find herbivory alone, we teach them the right way. Doesn't the religion against predators sound familiar?"

Something clicked in my brain, as the prevalence of the Great Protector faith flashed through my mind. The Federation encouraged it as an "emblem of Gojid culture"…no, that couldn't be right. I wasn't a predator! The thought of eating meat sickened me, and our government had been the first to take action against Earth.

The damn Kolshian looked so sure of himself though; somehow, my heart knew he was telling the truth. I sank to my knees, and stared at my lengthy claws in horror. The ancestors in my genes ate carcasses. My body was conditioned for *that*. Acid surged in my throat, before I puked all over Nikonus' feet.

The Kolshian leader massaged my neck. "Oh, it's alright. We fixed your species…one of the most successful conversions. Chalk it up as something you have in common with the upright apes."

The self-hatred was on the same level as when I realized my mistake with Marcel. Cilany was giving me the petrified look she gave Carlos, like I was a monster. All I wanted was to escape from my body; there was no way I could control predator instincts I didn't know I had. This was a nightmare of unimaginable proportions.

"No. You're lying," I whimpered.

"I am not. See, Cilany? It's cruel."

The reporter's eyes watered. "I don't know what to say. This is a lot at once."

I crumpled into a ball, letting my tears drip to the floor. A faint thought wondered how the humans would react, but I didn't have the energy for hypotheticals. Everyone I ever knew and loved…

myself and my family…were abominations. Not only had the Federation done what the Arxur said, but our members were corrupted. My perennial allegiance was gone.

What did Gojid history actually look like? What elements of our culture had been wiped away? I didn't know how we'd begin to figure that out, with the cradle gone. It wasn't clear who we were, or how to retain a cohesive identity. The humans, for all their goodwill, couldn't help us in this regard.

Nikonus leaned forward. "Now, you see why it's important to protect these secrets. People like the Gojids can live in peace from their past. We've made it possible for them to walk among us, without threatening stability. We saved them."

"What you did is wrong," Cilany whispered, shooting a glance at me. "You've been conducting genetic engineering, on innocent species, at…I don't even know how large a scale. Your actions are going to kill us all, between the Arxur and the humans!"

"You haven't learned a thing here. If you publish any of this, I'll shoot it down as a wild fabrication. There's no proof. Nobody would believe you."

The Harchen chuckled bitterly, and pointed to her notepad. A tiny camera was taped to the top, blinking yellow. My gaze focused on the lens, a desperate plea for help. I wondered if the humans were watching this livestream now, from their shuttle. The Kolshian's eyes widened with horror, and he slapped a tentacle over his mouth.

Cilany cleared her throat. "They don't have to believe me. You just told everyone yourself."

Nikonus bared his teeth. "What?! Short-sighted bitch! You have no idea what you've just done. I should have you both shot!"

"Ha, execute us on video. Go ahead. The truth is out there, and you can't take it back."

There was a certainty in her words, and she knelt beside me without hesitation. I let her help me stand, grateful for the support. Kindness for the Gojids might be on permanent hiatus, now that we were outed as predators. Nausea lingered around the notion of my species eating meat. It would take years to make sense of this interaction.

I didn’t know that Cilany was right to broadcast any of this, even with the lies and manipulation we’d uncovered. Regardless, nobody could’ve known the content Nikonus would divulge. It would be curious to see how the Federation’s citizens reacted to our interview. The humans were destined to side with the Arxur now, so what mattered was the time we had left.

Chapter 68

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 24, 2136

Wrapped in warm bedsheets, I emerged into a groggy wakefulness. It took a second to identify my surroundings as a hospital room, and another to recall how I ended up here. A human was reclining in a chair, with wire-rimmed glasses over her eyes and dark curls falling over her face. That was Sara Rosario, browsing something on her holopad.

“Sara?” I gargled.

Her rosy lips curved up in a smile, and she switched off her reading materials. The predator sprang up from her seat in a heartbeat, pressing a water glass to my lips. I didn’t understand why she was here, but it was good to see a familiar face. The scientist hadn’t made contact with my office since Earth’s fall; I was worried about her.

Sara placed a hand on my shoulder. “Stay down. Your body has been through quite a shock. I don’t know how to say this…”

I watched in silence as the human bit her lip, a gesture that suggested discomfort. She removed her glasses, and set them on the bedside table. The intensity of those forward-facing eyes, observing every little detail, was mesmerizing. I tried to signal with an ear flick that it was okay to be direct.

“That was a ‘go ahead’, right? Well, I’m afraid your tail had to be amputated, Tarva,” the scientist sighed. “If it was lacerated a few inches higher, you would have spinal damage. The good news is you can walk and return to normal activities.”

I lowered my eyes, taking a moment to process the news. “I… suspected as much, seeing the look on Noah’s face. But so much of our non-verbal communication is with tail signals. It’s like your fingers.”

“I know, and we want to help. I’ve gotten in touch with some great people on Earth, who’ve created prosthetics for animals.” Sara offered a comforting smile. “It’ll take some getting used to, but the

prototype I ordered for you is cutting-edge; it'll respond to your brain signals. We'd have it ready quicker, but our manufacturing is scrambled."

My thoughts turned back to the maimed human attendees. It could've been much worse for me, as there had to be a vast number of casualties. My heart ached at the thought of more dead Terrans. I still couldn't understand why anyone would do such a thing. Even predators killed for a reason; knowing why this happened would offer solace.

Explaining an event to my government and my citizens, which no doubt had been sensationalized by the media, would be a challenge. The Venlil populace must be freaked out; the smooth-sailing months of first contact lulled us into feeling safe around humans. This would give the exterminators backing for their vehement objections to the 'infestation.'

I leaned back against the pillow. "I hope I didn't say anything harsh about humans. My memory is…a bit fuzzy on the details."

"That's natural. Your brain is protecting itself," she responded. "You were badly injured and in shock, and what you went through would traumatize a lot of humans too. If you're scared of me now, I'll leave; I understand the event is fresh."

"No, please stay, I…just feel sad. I really wanted to see humanity succeed. You're my predators, my friends, my snarling guardians. What happened, Sara? I don't understand."

"You know we react differently than you. You might've heard us reference our flight-or-fight response, as opposed to your flight-alone instincts. When crowds panic for you, there's stampedes; we can have those too. But if a human group is agitated with our fight side…"

Understanding dawned on me, and I exhaled a shuddering laugh. Sara raised an eyebrow in a quizzical gesture. The fact that it was a predator's stampede, not any murderous undercurrent, took a weight off my shoulders. Everyone would be able to grasp how personal agency became hazy in those situations.

The humans are just like us, a more aggressive version of us.

Of course, the Terrans felt like we did during an Arxur raid. They were threatened by a genocidal enemy, one they couldn't hope to

fight or dissuade. Every second on Venlil Prime, they were scared for their lives and for their entire species. Combine that with grief, and even stalwart predators would lose their refinement. The bomb's chaos made fear-driven anger spill over; it was the mere culmination of a horrendous week for humanity.

"If it's like a stampede, then it'll make sense to any Venlil that things got out of hand. I must issue a statement to the public, and see that charges aren't pressed. We know what it's like to lose control," I reassured her.

"What? There's no excuse for violence!" Sara's lips moved in a frenzy, as though she couldn't say the words fast enough. "I was helping you understand the behavior, not exonerating it. Humans are expected to control ourselves, no matter how extreme the circumstances. Many people are hurt or dead; that's never acceptable."

"It was awful, I do recall. Noah took a long time to stand…wait, where is Noah?"

The female scientist lifted a bouquet of Earth-borne flowers from the table, and brought them over to me. They were an intricate cone of petals, bearing a rich shade of red. Unless this was a human gesture of condolences, I assumed those were left as a gift from Noah. I was still puzzled why he wasn't present, but I took the alien plants with gratitude.

"Noah sat by your side all night, refused to let any doctors look at him. The blast gave him a minor concussion; I had to talk some sense into him, tell him to rest up," Sara said. "I'm sure you'd want him to take care of himself. But he bought you these first…said he hoped they'd cheer you up."

I flicked my ears. "What about Meier?"

The human's thin smile fell in a heartbeat, like I'd asked her something terrible. There was the knowing glint in her eyes; it was the pitiful look of someone who couldn't bring herself to say the words. Sharing the worst news was difficult, when it was bound to enact a heavy toll on another person. Tears swelled around my irises, long before she found her voice.

Sara averted her eyes. "The Secretary-General is dead. He bled out on the operating table…too many organs ruptured. Gunshot wounds

to the abdomen are nasty. I'm sorry."

I pulled the blanket over my face, in an attempt to smother the grief. Elias Meier had dedicated himself to virtue and the pursuit of peace to the last. Every temptation pushed him the opposite direction, but he was true to his beliefs. He steered humanity toward its best attributes; I counted on him to make hard decisions for everyone's benefit. The Secretary-General was always kind to us, and bent over backward for our partnership to succeed.

Elias will be missed. He was a true leader, willing to do whatever was necessary. He dreamed big; there was so much he could've offered humanity.

"The Venlil doctors completed a brain scan post-mortem, at the forceful request of extermination officers," the female human continued. "They wanted data to distinguish 'good ones' from 'human animals.' Analysis of our thoughts, weaknesses, and anatomy. Tarva, I don't like the sound of that."

My head poked out from the blanket. "What? They're not in charge. Get General Kam over there, and make sure nobody else touches him!"

"Kam cleared them out for us, soon as the UN got wind of it. Lots of people don't trust humans, after…well, the bomber of the assembly released their call-to-arms. We don't know how to allay the general fear. We're doing everything we can to identify the culprit, but that might take time."

Sara lowered herself onto the edge of the bed, bringing her holopad into view. A human wearing a mask was recording themselves on video. Something about the way this one leaned forward with aggression screamed predator. There were no identifying features visible, so this could be any Terran I passed. The surroundings were dark, leaving no way of discerning the location either. Even the voice was distorted by some filter, which made the words throatier than an Arxur's cadence.

"Our leaders have been putting alien interests before ours. They dragged humanity into a war we have no business being a part of, without getting the full picture. Elias Meier's death is the first step in putting things right. He failed to defend Earth, while capitulating to the creatures who put us down. He, and everyone like him, are responsible for the billions dead."

The predator finished the first segment of their claim; that boastful attitude resembled happiness, while taking credit for the dead human leader. How could that seem like an achievement to anyone? Behind the mask, the speaker was expressionless as they continued. But the accusatory finger wag they threw in was decisive, ripe with anger.

“It is time we have a government that puts humanity first! We are a superior species, more than the mindless animals that populate this galaxy. It’s time we claim our rightful mantle. Justice and retribution are due, not the peace groveling Meier sought, to our detriment. He was weak, in the face of continual attacks. He was soft, in the face of ultimatums. A senile traitor to mankind.”

The anonymous Terran breathed an aggravated sigh, losing steam for a moment. They collected their thoughts, and refocused on the camera. Despite not being able to see the ferocious eyes, I could feel their gaze cutting through me like a blade. This predator was unstable, polluted by hatred and blame.

“From now on, we must make sure that any human who appeases alien-interests has no safe haven. The officials must be replaced by force if necessary. We will not allow anyone to apologize for our nature anymore. Any aliens who side against us must be treated as enemies. Now is the time to take action, my fellow man.

Make your voices heard, and show no mercy! Death to the Federation!”

My eyes stretched wide, after the verbose speech concluded on a morbid note. I had no idea that humans had such scorn for the Secretary-General. And for the crime of wanting peace, of all things? The attack on Earth wasn’t his fault; blaming Meier for not pulling out a miracle was preposterous. Honestly, the predators were fortunate their planet survived at all.

There was a reason Venlil wanted to gloss over the necessary intervention of the Arxur. We didn’t want to associate our friends, humanity, with the race of savage tormentors. I doubted many people would be open to considering that the Federation started the war, besides me. My hesitation existed because our predators had been slapped in the face, time and again.

I understood how Terrans might think the Arxur were the lesser evil, after recent suffering skewed their view. The grays were the

ones who showed interest in diplomacy, and came to Earth's rescue in their darkest hour. I couldn't fault my friends for questioning their loyalties. Still, it was jarring to hear a human murderer call for violent acts against the Federation and the UN.

I heaved an anxious sigh. "I've never heard one of your people talk like that. Is that what, well, predator disease looks like in predators?"

"Uh, I guess? Most humans are normal as can be, harmless unless harmed." Sara scratched her scalp, and hunched her shoulders with discomfort. "Our outliers are more extreme, because we have more of an inherent ability for violence. I apologize for the supremacist rhetoric that individual broadcasted."

"Not your fault. I'll happily agree that you're a superior species in many ways. But 'mindless animals' sounds like it could come verbatim from an Arxur. Oh, uh…I need to get out of here, now."

Sara pushed me back, as I swung my legs over the bedside. My brain had blotted out Meier's last request upon waking, likely because my subconscious wanted to avoid the task. The Secretary-General had known his survival odds were negligible. Freeing the Venlil cattle was what he wished to be his legacy.

Elias claimed that the nightmarish Chief Hunter aspired to end the war and sapient farming. It was quite possible the Secretary-General was projecting his own dreams. That human wouldn't have intended for me to get hurt, of course. He had little concept of how manipulative and deceitful Arxur were. It was tough to tell where calculation ended, and authenticity began.

The hateful words Meier touted as theatrics, a stunt by Isif to avoid execution, had convinced me well enough. There hadn't been a moment's hesitation when he called me lesser and an 'animal', much like the human bomber. The fact that the first parallel that popped into my mind was a Terran mass murderer wasn't a good sign. Did I trust the Secretary-General's judgment enough to go through with this?

It wasn't like I actually heard what Isif told Meier for myself, to make my own judgment. It's down to whether I believe an obligate child-eater could want peace.

"Stop kicking me! Governor, you're not going anywhere!" the

scientist objected. “You’re just tiring yourself out.”

I flicked my ears. “The Venlil cattle exchange has to go through, and Meier isn’t here to finish it. This can’t wait; I have no idea who your new leader is, or what they’ll do. Elias begged me to speak to Isif…I respect him too much not to try.”

“Isif? The Arxur’s commander in this sector?! Meier shouldn’t have requested that, especially with your personal history.”

“Despite that, if an Arxur truly wanted peace, I am willing to try. It’s its…his intentions I’m concerned about. Our history with them doesn’t offer any indication of empathy.”

“But you know they’ve shown it to humans.”

“Or at least mimicked it. The mere thought of Isif makes me shudder, and want to crawl under the bed. Damnit, I’m going, before I change my mind. I just have to release a statement to the Venlil people first, for your sake.”

Sara knitted her coarse brows together, and raised a finger in the Terran ‘one second’ gesture. She retrieved a wheelchair from the corner, moving me into it before I could protest. How weak and frail did the human think I was? I could walk on my own! Getting used to the lack of balance from my missing tail, before I faceplanted with Isif, was important.

“I’m coming with you, and it’s not a debate. Noah’s not the only one who can disregard his welfare,” she quipped.

I squirmed as the chair rolled out of the room. “You don’t have to do that. The work you’re doing with the Venlil soldiers is important.”

“You’re more important. Besides, I thought you’d want someone you knew as your liaison. I’m here as the interim ambassador, and also as an old friend who owes her life to you. Isif is less likely to harm you with a human around, so I’m coming.”

“Well, alright, if you insist. The two of us have a lot of catching up to do, Sara. I haven’t seen you since the exchange program.”

“Heh, you were gone to Aafa for over a month with lover boy. I hate politics, anyways. Your diplomatic functions bore me to death, if I’m honest. I’ll be a poor ambassador for that stuff.”

“Likewise, doing your work…all the data and analyzing, would bore

me silly. But your curiosity was one of the first things that made me sense a kindred spirit in humans. I know how much research excites you."

"Oh, the science going on now is everything I've dreamed of. We're mapping the Venlil genome, testing fear responses, and writing theses about your sociology and ecology. Full study might take centuries, but the breakthroughs we're making are priceless! Suffice to say, I'm happy manning the projects and lecture circuits."

It didn't escape my notice that Sara avoided mentioning the Arxur as a topic of interest, despite their commonalities with humans. Something told me that she was afraid of Isif too; the grays' actions had sickened her from the start. Her unease made me feel a bit better about my soul-crushing dread.

What good could come of this meeting Elias wanted, beyond a bitter agreement? I wasn't sure it was possible to have a meaningful conversation, with creatures that thrived on cruelty. At least sailing off into the night would reassure the Venlil. Visiting Earth would be a public display of trust in humanity, to back my issued statement.

If the masses knew the reason for my voyage, it would undermine the soothing explanation about human stampedes. They would spit on Elias Meier's corpse for broaching the topic, and despise me for negotiating with vile monsters. It wasn't clear how we would disguise the methods used to save any Venlil cattle. This was going to be a precarious situation to manage, from an optics perspective.

Chapter 69

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 25, 2136

This wasn't how I imagined my first visit to Earth; communicating with a disorganized UN via hail that went unanswered for minutes. The humans on the line were terse at first, but there was a drastic shift in tone after they realized who I was. It made me feel guilty to be landing, while they were on edge and reeling from the attacks. The poor Terran governments were still trying to clean up the aftermath.

It was stunning to see the sprawling oceans from above. This was not the image of a predator hellscape the Federation depicted; pictures didn't do Earth's serenity justice. The humans were blessed with a gorgeous homeworld. Perhaps this is why they were obsessed with studying their environment and caring for animal life, despite their pre-ordained role as killers.

When I asked to be pointed to Chief Hunter Isif, we were referred to a base outside New York City. My heart ached, as I recalled that was once the UN's headquarters. Our ship was granted immediate clearance by the regional powers, and the American tribe heaped on apologies that they couldn't scramble a proper welcome. It did surprise me that the US radio operator politely said she 'hoped I wasn't here to stir up trouble.' Our predator friends really didn't want to piss off the Arxur.

A green-and-brown pelted human waited outside the ship, with a contingent behind them. "Governor Tarva, we're honored by your visit. Please, let us know if there's anything you need."

The soldier snapped a hand to their forehead, and the others behind mirrored the cue. I didn't understand what this gesture meant, but it seemed respectful. It was difficult to discern every human cue, since their body language varied so drastically from the rest of the galaxy. I wished once again that they had tails to make it easier.

Sara sensed my confusion, and leaned by my ear. "That's a salute. It's a military gesture of respect; they're welcoming you as one of their own."

“Uh, thanks? Do I do it back?” I asked.

The American soldier chuckled. “Sure, you can if you want.”

I raised my paw awkwardly, pressing the pad down against my ear. The humans had a good-natured laugh at my discomfort, and the leader extended a clawless hand in greeting. Recognizing that invitation as the primary human introductory gesture, a show of non-hostility, I placed my paw in their hand. Those fingers tightened in a vicelike grip for a moment, before breaking away.

“Chief Hunter Isif is in the mobile unit there with the excessive, um, decorative weapon displays. We’re surprised, and slightly concerned, by your request, Governor,” the spokesperson growled. “That said, we’re happy to acquiesce any ask by our oldest alien ally. Would you like an escort?”

I flicked my ears. “No, thank you. Though, perhaps you could wait outside, in case I need, er, help?”

The soldier nodded, and stepped out my way. Sara trailed behind me with delicate footsteps, taking awhile to survey the devastation. The horror was plain on her face, as she saw the razed skyline; this place had once been a teeming mass of Terran civilization. The grand architecture and the homes of millions were obliterated in the bombing, which left the population center in disarray.

I had no idea if Isif had been told to expect us, but he hadn’t left any grays waiting outside. The door wasn’t left ajar as an invitation either. That set me more on edge than I already was, escalating the knot of fear in my stomach. Perhaps the Chief Hunter wasn’t at all interested in talks with a lesser species, and was lying inside in ambush. What was I thinking?

My feet came to a halt by the door, standing stationary. “N-no, I d-don’t want to.”

Sara placed a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to do this. We can turn back. I’m sure the American military would be happy to go through the dog-and-pony show, even in their current state.”

“T-the what? I…help me walk in.”

“You’re asking me to carry you? That’ll probably be a bad look.”

“Ugh, n-never mind. You’re r-right.”

Sucking in a gasping breath, I slammed my paw down on the door

handle. The room was pitch-black, despite it being midday; the Arxur had placed blackout curtains over every window. A single lamp was turned on in the corner, illuminating Isif's silhouette.

The predator was massive, with a girth that put the weightiest humans to shame. That was due to his hardy skeleton and abdominal muscles. The rough scales were visible on his spine, since he had dropped to all fours. He…it was on the floor with a Gojid child in its mouth. The beast was snacking on the poor little thing, who was wailing her head off.

"WHOA! AAAHHH!" she shrieked.

My horror turned to confusion, as I realized Chief Hunter Isif was spinning around in circles. Upon closer inspection, the Arxur had its…his teeth gripping the child's scruff. He hadn't even drawn blood, despite being able to taste her flesh. There were no signs of drool around his lips, or dilation in his slit pupils either.

If I didn't know better, I'd think the prey kid was enjoying this. She was moving her arms up and down, like a bird's wings. The hunter stopped moving his paws, and set the child down on the floor. The Gojid giggled, bouncing on her haunches.

"Again, Siffy!! Faster this time!" she cheered.

The Arxur issued a bone-chilling growl that set my fur on end. "My name is *not* Siffy. Siffy is harder to say than Isif!"

"But Siffy is a better name. It's super cute!"

"Cute? Why you leaf-licking demon…take it back."

"No! I don't listen to you!"

"You came into *my* cabin, so you will listen to me. Don't make me roar at you, Nulia!"

"Yes, roar! Roar at that Venlil! It'll be funny!"

The Arxur whipped around, lacking peripheral vision like the humans. Isif had been distracted with Nulia, likely from resisting his urges to wolf her down; he hadn't noticed my entrance. I locked my limbs as his gaze landed on me. The last thing I wanted was to tremble and bray, but tears welled in my eyes nonetheless.

That thing looks so hungry, like he's sizing me up. Those jerky pupil movements…how did I ever think Noah was scary? This was a mistake.

“Tarva? Venlil governor?” Isif growled, his voice laced with surprise. “Come in, please. I…need help with the brat.”

Nulia poked her claws against his fangs. “See, Siffy is nice, Tawva. He looks like the bad monsters, but he rescued us. He’s not gonna eat anyone.”

“Quit sticking your grubby claws in my mouth! How would you like someone doing that to you?”

“I don’t have the snarling teeth. You do. Mawsle doesn’t care at all.”

“If Marcel is happy to be poked and prodded, that’s his business. It’s obvious he doesn’t discipline you at all.”

My eyes widened, as I picked up on the word Marcel. Perhaps that was a common male name for humans, since the odds that the tortured predator was here were astronomical. The Arxur flared his nostrils, and picked Nulia up by the scruff. He stalked past me, returning to a bipedal stance.

A human male limped up the stairs, with only stubble on his scalp. There was panic in his hazel eyes, along with a nasty pair of scars on his cheek. That was, in fact, the same wounds I’d seen on the half-dead human. His jaw dropped as he saw the Arxur toting the Gojid. The Terran lunged forward, snatching Nulia away with shaking hands.

Marcel bared his teeth, eyebrows slanted down. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you! What were you thinking, wandering into an Arxur’s lodgings?! You’re lucky that…ugh, I’ll tell you later.”

“Marcel!” I squeaked. “It’s good to see you up and about.”

A reddish eyebrow arched in confusion. “Governor Tarva? I don’t believe we’re acquainted, so I presume…well.”

Sara nodded her agreement. “We both were there when you were wheeled in. It’s wonderful to see you made a full recovery.”

“Haven’t got that far yet. Still working on getting my head right, and I’m not ashamed about it. Anyways, Nulia has been naughty and is going to be *grounded.* Take care, guys.”

“No! Why are you so mean? Stupid Mawsle!” the Gojid wailed. “I didn’t do anything! I hate you!”

The red-haired human snorted, pursing his lips with displeasure. It was nice to see him in good spirits, though I wondered how he

wound up as the caretaker for a Gojid. Terran predators seemed more than willing to bond with anything cute or young. I was just relieved to see Marcel's trauma hadn't turned him against aliens. Slanek must've been helpful on that front.

"Bah, humans are soft, aren't they? If I talked to my mother like that, she would've cracked my skull," Isif rumbled.

"That's sad." I turned around to face him, using all of my strength to meet his gaze. "T-there's nothing powerful about hurting someone…who can't fight back."

"I suppose, as we say, it's the weakling who seeks the slow-running prey. Tarva, this war proves nothing. Where is the pride of the hunt? The entire Federation is slow-running prey, far as I'm concerned."

"We're not prey. W-we shouldn't have to be running at all. We're people…not your f-food."

The Arxur closed his maw, studying me with interest. There was a hint of surprise in the pupils, perhaps even some grudging respect. I'd never looked at a gray's visage as anything more than a mindless predator. A smidge of thought and emotion was in there, even if it all went toward cruel intelligence.

Whatever I expected from Isif, it wasn't playing with a Gojid child. He has some self-control, even if it's taxed now.

Sara clasped her fingers together. "Prey is demeaning. If the Governor doesn't want to accept that label anymore, power to her. I know I'd like to have people stop calling me 'predator.'"

I ducked my head. "I'm working on that, but it slips out when I'm s-scared."

"Tarva, you don't call me a 'gray', I'll drop the word 'prey.' Such a stupid name," Isif hissed. "Your fur is gray, and they don't call you that. Fair, yes?"

I plopped myself on the couch. "Fair."

"You are fascinating. I do see why the humans think you have potential. You reined in your fear faster than any pr…herbivore I've seen. You talk to me."

"B-because I want to understand. I understand what an obligate carnivore is now. I know that you can eat fruit feasts and starve.

What I don't understand is why you didn't try to stop this…or make it quick."

The Arxur walked slowly, his form lumbering through the shadows. I could imagine the Federation never looked at such monstrosities as truly sapient. These weren't the social humans, whose common ancestors included tree-dwelling frugivores. Isif had bony claws that could tear through skeletal muscle, and yellow teeth that curved out of his jaw. He was the perfect killing machine.

Sara was uninterested in sitting; she preferred to stay on her feet. The gray paused by the couch, eyeing the open spot next to me. His tail lashed the cushion, and waited for a reaction. A predator I had screaming nightmares about was so close, staring me down. I could feel his rank breath on my neck.

My heart pushed against my rib cage, leaving me with the urge to clutch my chest. Those flaring nostrils must be picking up my nutritious blood. If I understood how scent worked, he could taste me on the breeze. I was certain he could smell the fear chemicals, coursing through my scrawny frame. My breathing was becoming erratic, despite my efforts to measure it.

Isif leaned back. "I am trying to make this war stop. Some idiots from your side started this all. It doesn't matter much now; they're dead. Neither of us are responsible for what our species did."

"You're a Chief Hunter. That's not a powerless grunt," Sara interjected.

"I'm one person. The fighting was necessary. The cost of the Federation winning the war was higher than us winning, until now. Venlil are curious…accepting predators. An anomaly."

I hugged my knees to my chest. "D-do the Arxur even h-have a society…to lose? What are you?"

The Chief Hunter retrieved a holopad from an armrest. The device had grips carved into the back, which were clearly meant to suit an Arxur's claws. He pounded at a keyboard that seemed to have an alphabet of random slashes, and a low growl rumbled in his throat. The predator picked out a single image, turning it to me.

The picture looked like a village of modest huts, separated from each other by sizable distances. The Arxur might as well have installed chasms between themselves and their neighbors. There

was no electricity visible inside the dwellings, since the nocturnal grays preferred darkness. I guessed they'd only use power for appliances.

Surprisingly, there were no carcasses hanging outside, and no blood on the overgrown grass. All roads seemed to converge on the woods, where the activity ticked up. Bulky grays were fighting in pavilions, while younger ones practiced stalking alone on wobbly pedestals. It figured that their playing was all hunting and violence.

The humans at least have the decency to mask their predation. They would never think about hunting for fun.

Isif bared his teeth. "That's our homeworld, the warm spheroid we call Wriss. That means Rock, loosely. Most people work on the farms, in Betterment, in shipping and manufacturing, or in the military. The government assigns rations based on merit."

"Sapient rations. All you ever ate."

"The alternative is to starve. I do not wish to die that way. You do not know what it is to be hungry, to live with pains and cravings."

"I would rather starve than eat *people*."

"That's easy to say when you're content and sated, is it not? Ask your human friends what they are like when deprived of food. They eat each other, in extreme cases!"

My eyes shifted to Sara, who flinched. The human scientist brought a fist to her lips, coughing awkwardly. The thought of my predator friends eating their own kind made my stomach flip. I hadn't thought they'd munch on Venlil, let alone other Terrans. Was the Arxur mistaken?

"Cannibalism is taboo, and very rare," she managed. "People… many humans will do anything to survive. As Isif said, it's usually in extreme cases, with no other food for an extended time."

"T-that's appalling! That's worse than predatory."

"Of course it is. But Venlil steal food from each other during your famines. Eating human flesh sickens us, and that is an awful decision to make. Your body can't function without food and water. It's a biological requirement."

It was still fresh in my memory, how outraged Sara was when she learned of the Venlil cattle. I recalled how widespread fury and

disgust took root across Earth, when they discovered our plight. Yet now, the scientist was downplaying the consumption of sapients; her own race. Was starvation the only excuse predator races needed to cast aside their morals?

Isif curled his lip. “Arxur have such cases too. Also rare for us. Many people are desperate now, but it’s punishable by execution. The diseases are too dangerous, so the Dominion, well, made examples.”

“What? Diseases?” I squeaked.

Sara buried her face in her hands. “Prion diseases…transmitted through faulty proteins. Always lethal. Beyond the moral issues, that’s a good incentive for us not to, um, eat human flesh.”

There’s communicable diseases that can only spread through predation?! It’s a wonder the omnivore humans haven’t all gone vegetarian.

It was tough to reconcile the disconnect between the civilized humans I knew, and the worrisome practices I continued to uncover from any that were “desperate.” This exchange made me feel a lot less certain on Terrans never eating Venlil, a qualifier I had believed with all my heart. These two alien predators who had more in common than I’d like to admit. I knew Elias Meier hid a lot from us under his regime, but the extent of the omissions was startling.

Isif tilted his head. “You could help humanity now, Tarva. Unless you think they deserve to choose between eating their dead, or starving to death alongside their kin.”

“I am helping. I love them still,” I said, wiping a frightful tear away. “But I’ve given them everything I can spare, and then some.”

“No, you have not. You know of their lab-grown meat, which the humans conveniently avoided divulging to me. That is the prize catch, don’t you see? Grow enough to satisfy our cattle deal, because your friends can’t afford to give their scraps away. Then, you can send surplus food to Earth; fill some empty bellies.”

“You’re insane. You think Venlil would ever grow flesh as predator food? The backlash I would get…”

“It’s a small price to free millions of Venlil, without the animal killing you pretend your paws are clean of. You’re a hunting-challenged species, but it’s truly no different than cell cultures.”

“Hunting-challenged species” was a roundabout way of calling Venlil prey. I tried to swish my tail in irritation, but the missing appendage was unresponsive. It was surprising the Arxur hadn’t commented on the amputated stump. He didn’t question why Elias Meier wasn’t present either, so I suppose he’d learned of the bombing.

Isif was correct that it was only cell cultures and lab work, but growing carcasses was a tough pill to swallow. It felt like a betrayal of everything the Federation believed in…like we were selling ourselves out. Mixed emotions played at my human companion’s face, as though she was debating whether to agree with him.

Putting our industrial capacity to manufacturing dead bodies…yikes, I thought to myself. *The Venlil extermination officers will say it’s a slippery-slope to enabling wildlife murder. They might be right.*

Sara bit her lip. “While that would be helpful, I don’t want to pressure the Governor. Growing predator food for you, and even for us, would sicken her.”

“I’m sure it is not a savory thought, when she finds everything about Arxur abhorrent. But it is never wrong to do what you must to survive, and for the greater good,” Isif growled.

I blinked. “I don’t know if we can get past the stigma.”

“Think of it this way. If you had grown meat for us from the start, how many Federation lives would not have been lost? How many years of pain would’ve been avoided? I ask myself those questions about the Arxur, and it helps me speak to you. My pride and my culture say I do not need your kind, but the stigma is inconsequential. It is illogical.”

“I know it’s illogical.” I thought about the feral predator’s words, and how my daughter could still be alive. Would I not grow flesh in a heartbeat, if it stopped the Arxur from bombing Venlil schools? “I’ll…try to get it through. Rush it, even. I won’t make any promises, but let’s plan for the exchange five weeks from today.”

The Chief Hunter rose from the couch, attempting to give a polite tail swish. It came across as a rapid lash, but I recognized it as an effort to communicate in our terms. I couldn’t believe how insightful that dialogue was, and how polished the gray was. Because of the humans, the Venlil took the first step to repairing the

rift between predator and prey.

It remained to be seen if this cattle plot the United Nations dreamt up ended in disaster.

Chapter 70

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, Federation Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: October 27, 2136

The overall reaction to the news on Aafa was pure pandemonium. I believed that the Kolshian public as a whole had no idea about any of this; they were livid with their own government for keeping predator species alive. Leaders of every planet rushed to the airwaves to broadcast statements, with a few withdrawing all ties to any converted race.

The Krakotl ambassador barricaded himself in his quarters, and reportedly called in airstrikes on his own holdout worlds. The avian commanders would not adhere to this order, which drove him further into a rage. After leading the raid on Earth, it was too much for them to process that they were the first sapient flesh-eaters.

Chief Nikonus did not resign his post, and instead, attempted to appease the angered members. The Kolshians had been the leading force among races that sought a military alliance with Earth. A new coalition was organized to threaten anyone who left the Federation, or reached out to humanity. Tens of thousands of ships were brought on preemptive standby.

But the neutral factions were the interesting ones to observe. The divide became skewed in the humans' favor, as the Federation turned on each other. Of the non-converted neutrals, those with close ties to presumed omnivores were the likeliest to offer aid. The Sulean and Iftali Alliance, a government consisting of two sapient species from the same world, were the first to announce their support for Earth. The Iftalis' religion based on dietary purity led to unpleasant conclusions.

I hadn't come to terms with being a predator, or a 'scavenger' as Nikonus had put it. Cilany worked tirelessly to spin a tale of victimhood, but I didn't feel oppressed. Perhaps the Kolshians were right, that they'd turned the Gojids into something worth saving. We *were* a better species for not eating meat, and never knowing that temptation.

What would the humans say? Is it wrong to feel that this cure was a

cure…that I'm a disease?

Right now, I was engaging in my first interaction with the Federation in days. The Mazic and Dossur ambassadors were present as Terran-allied parties. The other attendees, the Harchen and Tilfish representatives, were both partial contributors to the annihilation fleet. The meeting location was outside of Aafa, on an abandoned station. It was difficult to focus on the conversation, but I was needed here to guess at humanity's desires.

Quipa, the Mazic vice president, flared her trunk. "We've known contaminated species like the Gojids and the Tilfish for centuries. I can't believe that they all were harboring bloodlust in secret for so long. That's solid evidence that humans might, just might, be genuine allies."

"I had no idea about any of this. I thought just like any of you. I'm still disgusted by predators," I mumbled, in a dazed voice.

Harchen ambassador Raila ignored me, focusing on Cilany. "This has given me a new perspective on humanity. They're predators, but they're open about it…not hiding among us."

"We only contributed about 100 ships. The Federation brainwashed us into thinking predators needed to be destroyed." The Tilfish representative, Dwirl, was an insectoid being, with mandibles and a black exoskeleton. "The Kolshians won't help us, or acknowledge us now. We can't predict what they'll do to our people next, but the only species that might've helped us is set on our heels."

"Surrender. They might kill you, but who really cares now? I don't," I sighed.

The Harchen reporter glowered at me, floored by my brusqueness. I suppose I had crossed a line with that remark. Still, my sympathy for a species that wanted to kill humanity, right up until it was their ass on the line, was dwindling. Everything felt hollow since the revelation; we were all a lot of hypocrites. I just wanted to hurt something…which I guessed was the buried predator talking.

You're a monster, Sovlin, in so many ways. You are disgusting.

"The humans themselves said revenge wasn't about blind genocide! Get a grip," Cilany hissed.

I chewed my claws. "Sorry. I just understand that the Arxur are going to kill us all, and the humans? They'd be well within their

rights to tell us all to fuck off."

The Harchen reporter glanced at her holopad, as though she was waiting for someone. I noticed that she had been rather apprehensive around me, since Nikonus told her the truth. Writing off my temper as a poor attitude wasn't simple anymore. We had known each other for years, and now, it was as if we were strangers.

My ears detected a faint sound, like the patter of rain on a rooftop. Instead of coming from above, the light vibrations echoed through the floor. Something bipedal was attempting stealthy movement. My reptile friend showed visible relief, as she picked up on it too. That suggested it wasn't Kolshian soldiers here to knock us off.

Two human figures clicked open the door, and turned their backs to us. They must be checking that nobody had followed them. The predators were covered head-to-toe in full body armor, with helmets that concealed their features. I could tell from the slight limp in the male's step that it was Carlos covering the rear.

The slender predator, likely Samantha, made a high-pitched sound. It sounded similar to a bird whistle, and was followed by a hand wave. A Takkan male ducked out from behind a corner, receiving the coast clear message. I was shocked at the condition he was in; there were gashes and contusions all across his silver hide.

"What did you do to him?" Quipa shrieked, with a trunk flare. "Who invited you lot?!"

Cilany raised an arm. "I invited them!"

Carlos inhaled sharply, tightening his fingers around his gun. "That's the Takkan ambassador, jailed and mistreated by the Kolshians. We broke him out, while cantankerous Sovlin was snooping around."

"Uh, sorry. Old habit," the Mazic responded. "It's…good to see you, predators?"

Ambassador Raila was frozen at the sight of the predators. The humans were twice the height of an average Harchen, before gear bulked them up. She held a pen out in front of her with stiff arms, as if that would ward off gun-toting primates. To be fair, she was probably leaving this station in their custody or in a body bag.

Dwirl took a different approach, and clicked his mandibles in a

submissive note. He scuttled forward on his black, jointed legs, which connected to his rotund thorax. The Tilfish shook as he threw himself at the humans' feet. His antennae quivered and his beady eyes fixed on them, waiting for a reaction.

Carlos jumped backward with apparent fright, and barely kept his twitchy finger off the trigger. Samantha shook her head, muttering curses and denials. A shudder rippled down her back, while her legs seemed unsteady. The predators' response was bizarre, something I hadn't seen from them.

Were the humans afraid? They'd never shown any fear of aliens, not since I'd known them. Hell, both of these soldiers had gone up against the worst the galaxy had to offer. Carlos was eager to go toe-to-toe with an Arxur, throwing himself in its face without hesitation. Samantha jumped out amidst flames to turn the tables on exterminators.

What in the Protector has gotten into them? This is almost comical, that an insect species is what elicited fear from them.

"Dwirl, back up. I think you're scaring them," I growled.

Carlos took a shaky breath. "More like freaking me the fuck out."

"I second that. Totally creepy, man," Samantha added. "Cilany, a little warning next time?!"

Cilany looked bewildered. "Warning for what?"

The human predators watched warily, as the Tilfish shuffled back on his spindly legs. The Takkan representative was happy to take a seat, but the Terrans were hesitant to enter. Their posture, which was fluid and graceful under normal circumstances, had gone rigid as a board. They beckoned to me and Cilany, while swallowing more often than usual.

The other representatives stared, as the Harchen journalist and I jogged up to the predators. The UN soldiers pulled us aside, keeping their voices hushed. Their body language suggested tension, and they kept shooting glances at the Tilfish. It was threat assessment; they wanted to be certain he hadn't moved.

"First off, great work with Nikonus, both of you. More on that later." Samantha cleared her throat. "So, uh, many humans find bugs and crawly things unnerving, or outright disgusting. I'm not sure I can talk to…whatever that is."

“Seriously? You’re afraid of them, not the Arxur?”

“Don’t judge me! The deadliest animal on our planet is a tiny little insect called a mosquito. Worse than all those predators you hate,” the human female hissed.

Carlos nodded. “Also, where Sam lives, there’s spiders everywhere that are fucking deadly too. We evolved to be afraid of them because they’re venomous.”

I leaned back in understanding. “They’re your natural predators? That’s…kinda hilarious, to be honest. See, now you know how we feel, talking to you.”

“Oh, fuck you, Sovlin.” I could sense the female’s narrowed eyes, beneath her suit. “Give us a briefing on that…Dwirl, you called it. I need a moment.”

I tucked knowledge of the predators’ weakness away. This was the first time I’d ever seen their fearful reactions, and I hoped the humans could fight the irrationality. By the Protector’s blessing, they hadn’t even referred to the child-eating Arxur as a depersonalized ‘it.’ It wasn’t clear how they’d react to an enemy species that set off internal alarms.

Cilany piped up, with a bashful expression. “Dwirl’s species is called the Tilfish. They’re one of the modified races, we think. They were the smallest contributor to the attack on Earth, with a mere hundred ships.”

“They attacked us? So we can kill them all with a clear conscience; thank the Lord,” Samantha mumbled.

Carlos crossed his arms. “I doubt they’re all complicit. Everyone wanted to kill us because we looked creepy, Sam. Let’s…not be like that. I’m good, now…so let’s talk to the giant spider-ant thing before making decisions.”

The female predator snorted. “Sure, why not? Just another Friday with the Peacekeepers. See space, meet exciting new people, they said. It’ll be fun, they said.”

Samantha shook her head, and strode into the room with careful steps. She seemed to be mapping an exit route if needed. Neither human took a seat by the table; there was no doubt the assembled representatives had noticed their jumpiness. I hoped the Terrans could get it together. Perhaps it would be best to force Dwirl to

leave the proceedings, before someone got hurt.

Alar, the Dossur diplomat, chittered from atop the table. Hailing from the most diminutive species in the galaxy, the size gap was a difficult hurdle to overcome. The Dossur hadn't believed humanity's tale about their representative's death, and broke off relations with Earth. However, after Nikonus affirmed Kolshian culpability on tape, the rodents were back at the bargaining table.

"Now that is adorable," Carlos decided. "Look at those little ginger mouse ears! Hi!"

Alar shuddered at the predator's roar. "G-g…no, no! Please!! No eat, n-no eat!"

"You want to step outside, buddy?" I asked gently. The rodent scurried away at once, and the humans slumped their shoulders. "You're a lot bigger than him. Take heart, though…the Dossur are one of your original allies."

The male soldier sighed. "He is tiny. So much for—"

"Excuse me! Oh supreme predators, I beseech your mercy humbly. I apologize for my unworthy display earlier." Dwirl clicked his mandibles with adoration, but had the good sense to keep his distance this time. "I will see that all 1500 of our ships are turned over to you; anything we h-have, including our territory, is yours. Please accept the Tilfish's unconditional surrender. Just let my people live!"

Samantha rubbed the back of her neck, a self-soothing gesture. "Yes, we will pass along your surrender. Deliver your ships to the Sol system, and await our decision. We're under no obligation to show you mercy, bug."

The Tilfish adopted a mournful expression, but didn't argue with the human's curt reply. If the predators were thinking straight, they'd see the pragmatism of accepting that offer. Assimilating the insectoids' ships into their decimated armada would help them get back into the war. It would also set a precedent, so other enemies might surrender without a fight.

"Ignore my counterpart. Humanity recognizes your surrender, and will give the civilian presence full consideration," Carlos cut in. "Sam, I hate what they did to us, but the Federation has these people indoctrinated. They're not all bad. Look at Cilany, versus her

race."

The reporter tilted her head. "Thanks?"

"Don't mention it. I extend the same offer to your ambassador, for your sake, Cilany. Perhaps Raila has a bit more…regret now than she did on your recording."

"Yes, h-how terribly sad about Earth! Very sad indeed," the Harchen politician agreed.

The humans tilted their heads. Even without seeing their expressions, I could tell they found that response less than convincing. It was easy to visualize the sourness on Sam's face, as she cracked her knuckles slowly. Regardless of their instincts toward the Tilfish, Dwirl's groveling surrender landed better than Raila's lukewarm act.

The Harchen ambassador is lucky there's other species here that the humans don't want to chase off.

Carlos sighed. "Humanity plans to go on the offensive, before something else is done to us. Can we count on support from our friends?"

Quipa flared her trunk. "We'll send some of our military, and organize every ally we can. The Dossur won't be useful, but you're welcome to ask. Us Mazics will lend our ships and our army to your command. And, I'm sure the Takkan can clear the air with his government too."

"I agree, it's time to take the fight to the Federation. We are *not* their toys!" the liberated Takkan spat. "Humanity can lead us out of this darkness. They will. They must."

My spines bristled at the thought of war. "The Sulean and Iftalis are rapidly coordinating dozens of neutrals to loan to Earth, but the Federation is going to hit them hard, soon. There's no turning back, humans. I trust you to do things the right way, even if you don't trust yourselves."

The two predators shared a glance, and the assembled species scrutinized their mannerisms. I contemplated how humans were the only purpose I had left. Serving my debt to their kind was all that kept a wretch like me going; this was about vindicating an innocent race. None of my personal history mattered anymore, since everything I ever believed was a lie.

Samantha cleared her throat. “Time to go home. Come along, Sovlin…and Cilany, if you want. There’s a lot of plans to be hatched.”

War was a terrifying prospect, though the humans didn’t share my trepidation. They were eager to have a shot at actualizing revenge. The Terran resurgence could be swift and decisive, if they turned a few species’ scraps into a proper army. There was nobody else that could lead us into the future, or influence the Arxur at all. The fate of billions rested with the predators’ next actions.

Chapter 71

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: November 27, 2136

The United Nations extended me an official plea deal, which my lawyer was quick to secure. I was to serve with the Terran military for at least five years, as penance for my debt. The fact was, someone of my sickening proclivities was useful to them, and I knew a lot about Federation ships. Outlining a species' military tendencies and technological weaknesses was my specialty.

The humans had cobbled together a fleet, from the offerings that trickled in from dozens of planet-states. The Harchen and Tilfish surrendered their assets, and sent aid shipments as a peace offering; the predators were still deliberating what to do with them. However, neutral parties contributed the bulk of the vessels, along with a few old allies. The Terrans rushed the integration of millions of Federation servicemen into their ranks, after a mere week of anti-instinct training. Most aliens aboard this vessel were still acclimatizing to predators.

Ambitious as ever, the Terrans launched defensive and offensive operations simultaneously. But in fairness to their overzealous military, it was a mercy that they diverted resources to bail out the Mazics. The Kolshian-led force marching on their homeworld, Khoa, was enough to steamroll any fortifications. My role was as the resident expert on Federation tactics; I knew the terrain and local sensitivities better than my primate allies.

Captain Monahan scanned the bridge with her observant gaze. "All hands are on deck. FTL disruptors are still in full force, so we're going in the old-fashioned way. ETA to Khoa less than 30 minutes. Settle in at the sensors station, Sovlin."

I'd worked with just about every race over the years. Now, we were setting sail to fight people I once thought friends. It didn't put a good feeling in my stomach, but the masterminds needed to answer for their crimes. The Kolshians and the Farsul were the ones who set the predator hatred in motion; they bore responsibility for what had transpired on Earth.

“I don’t belong with humans…ma’am,” came my subdued reply. “Your crew deserves better. I’m surprised you requested me back.”

“Frankly? You’re an idiot in many ways, but you know a thing or two about alien tactics. Having someone who can identify anomalies and ship types, in real time, is useful.”

“Glad I can do something right.”

“Cut the crap. Romero and Harris were brought aboard for your welfare. They’re waiting for you, yes, with other people. Don’t be shy. Get your ass to your post.”

It took a colossal effort to walk across the aisle, and settle in at the weapons post. Samantha was sipping at a steaming drink, and bore the vacant look of someone whose mind was elsewhere. Carlos was focused on the battle readout, barely acknowledging my stare. I wondered how the humans came to terms with their monstrous side, when I just couldn’t get past mine.

Sapients aren’t supposed to be like us. Who the fuck am I now?

My gaze drifted to the unfamiliar human, who was leading the weapons’ station. This male was one of the tallest humans I’d seen, with a few inches on even Carlos. The predator sported lean muscles across his upper body, and had coarse hair the color of sand. A Yotul was seated alongside the Terran, reviewing the button functionality.

“Hello,” I offered.

Binocular eyes darted over to me, a rich blue. “I was told we had a Gojid here! I served on the cradle, actually, with one of a few Venlil that joined us. I would have never guessed you guys were omnivores too.”

The Terrans were the only species that didn’t think we were freaks, after the broadcast. They welcomed the news of past omnivores, rejoicing that they weren’t alone in their preferences. But while I’d come around to humanity’s cause, the last thing I wanted was to be a predator. It was a lonely status, full of grisly practices and animalism. How could I be in the same class as an Arxur?

Carlos coughed. “Don’t bring that up. They were raised from birth to hate meat-eaters; told there was nothing worse. Our buddy here’s had a rough time of it.”

“Right, my bad,” the stranger agreed. “Anyhow, I’m Tyler Cardona, and this is my partner from the Yotul exchange program, Onso. The last month has been pretty shit, but I was stoked to get accepted to that initiative.”

Onso flicked his reddish ears. “Ha. Tyler wouldn’t even eat around me, when we first met. It was like he was scared to talk about Earth.”

“You didn’t see how the Venlil I was with reacted. Slanek, that was his name; he puked his guts out and had a breakdown from a few beef crumbles in my MRE.”

My spines bristled in alarm, as the name Slanek reached my ears. It was as though someone dumped a bucket of ice-cold water on my head. If this Tyler knew the Venlil, he likely knew Marcel by extension. The red-haired human had mentioned he’d served on the cradle, and spoke about the tragedies that unfolded. Protector, it was just my luck to get stuck serving under one of his buddies.

I was fortunate Tyler didn’t realize who I was. For this particular human, my crimes were a personal attack on someone he cared about. I shot Sam and Carlos a pleading look, imploring them not to pipe up. Perhaps it was necessary to ask Captain Monahan for a transfer, although her reaction would be one of displeasure. Put simply, my identity could interfere with station performance, if it came to light.

“By the way, isn’t this a sick ride? I couldn’t pass up a chance to serve on one of the few human craft left in service,” the sand-haired Terran continued, giving the desk an enthusiastic slap. “Captain requested me because I’m an expert on the fear-suppression program. You hear that, Onso? *Expert.*”

“Quit the yapping. Will you let the newcomers get a word in? What’s your name, Gojid?” Onso asked.

I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t have one.”

Tyler snorted. “Of course you do! Don’t make me pry it out of your buddies. What’s your problem?”

“My problem is you talk too much, and we’re about to go into battle. Even Onso notices you can’t keep a lid on it. So kindly, shut the fuck up.”

The smile vanished from the sensor officer’s face, and he shot his

Yotul pal an incredulous look. His features took on a scowl, as he turned back to me. I squirmed under his paralyzing glare, knowing my words were too harsh. It wasn't my intent to offend the big guy, but opening up to him wasn't an option. It wasn't wise to advertise my identity to humans in general, let alone a packmate of Marcel.

A dangerous growl rumbled in his throat. "I am an officer of this ship. You don't get to speak to me like that."

"Hey Tyler, I know he's being an ass. He takes awhile to open up to humans," Carlos jumped in. "Please, cut him a break this once? Just let him settle in first, and warm up to you in his own time."

"Whatever. But it better not happen again. You want all work, no play? Start analyzing the subspace data, and plotting intercept vectors. Give me a list of potential targets, as soon as enemies are in sight."

I lowered my eyes. "Yes, sir."

Samantha sipped at her bean drink, momentary interest in her eyes. The female human and I had been getting along better since Cilany's rescue. All the same, I wondered if she'd turn me in to Tyler down the line. After this battle, I had to get myself transferred to a different station; weapons would be more up my alley anyways.

With a great deal of effort, I zeroed in on the sensor data. The subspace trails we could detect were faint, coming from the direction of Aafa. We had assumed the enemy would beat us here by a few hours. Visual contact was needed to assess the drive signatures, and determine how many species we were up against. I worried just how far the Federation would go, with their organization fracturing. The Mazics needed to hold out a little longer.

I cleared my throat. "No sign of friendly activity. The fact that there's no outbound trails suggests the skirmish is ongoing. Good news."

"Why is that?" Tyler asked, in a gruff voice.

"The Federation would send word home, if they'd achieved victory. We need to get a comm link with the Mazics…make sure their planetary defenses don't start picking us off."

The sensors officer relayed the message to Captain Monahan, who nodded in agreement. She issued orders to a Fissan at the comms

station, which was where most prey had been relegated. The alien crew members were doing their jobs seamlessly so far, but humans were best suited for high-stress roles. Nobody else had the ability to block out fear, like it wasn't even there.

Onso tampered with the viewport settings, straining on his digitigrade legs. The Yotul looked more comfortable with the technology than I expected. Perhaps Tyler had taught him the modern ways, somehow? The blond human hadn't shown any concern with leaving a primitive novice unattended. It was a wonder those two found any common ground for friendship.

I pored over the subspace trails, and fed the data to the computer for analysis. The AI took several seconds to extrapolate optimal paths, once I input Khoa as the primary target. It was likely the Federation would take a conservative approach, in case of a human ambush. Predators were predictable, but the same could be said of prey…the normal races. That meant we might be able to spot a lookout ship.

If we can take them out before they relay useful data, that's ideal. The less information the enemy has, the better.

I leaned over to Onso. "Search for recon ships on the viewport. We want to take out their eyes."

"Apologize to Tyler first," the Yotul barked.

"This is not the time for petty squabbles! We're soldiers, not daycare workers. Do you want to lose ships and lives because you're mad at me?"

"I don't want to work with you."

"The feeling is mutual. Now isn't the time to disrupt the captain, but I'll request a transfer when this is over. We have to work together, this once, because what you want and what you get are two different things. Start the fucking scan already, if you know how."

The uplift bared his teeth, and I noted the fur on his hackles rising. He saw I had no problem with my human guards, which suggested my issue with his friend was personal. Truth be told, every part of me wanted to give Tyler a rambling apology, for all my transgressions. If he wanted a piece of me, I'd be happy to let him throw some well-placed haymakers. But at this moment, coming

clean was the worst thing I could do; it would interfere with the mission.

Tyler narrowed his eyes. “Is there a problem…again?”

“The Gojid thinks he can order me around. He’s insufferable,” Onso grumbled.

Samantha exhaled a flustered breath. “He only said to search for scout ships. The Feds will take more caution than usual, I imagine.”

“If he’s giving solid advice, go with it,” the tall officer said. “Onso, I know you’re sticking up for me, but there’s too much at stake to be arguing now. I can look out for myself, okay?”

The Yotul pinned his ears back, before shifting the viewport at maximum magnification. Idle asteroids greeted us from the circumstellar disc, but nothing was of particular interest. In the meantime, our comms station had established contact with the Mazics. They sounded uncharacteristically happy to be on the line with the human fleet.

Carlos leaned close to my ear. “You could just make up a name, man. What about Vinny?”

I scrunched my nose with distaste, ignoring his suggestion. That would just leave Tyler infuriated that I’d deceived him, when someone called me by my real name. Onso released an excited yip beside us, and brought a small shuttle into focus. Its emissions were too minuscule to appear on sensors, without someone telling the computer where to look.

Our ship’s weapons revved to life, poised to decimate the first enemy contact. The humans had the forethought to charge the railgun in transit; there were no haphazard actions in this fleet. Captain Monahan barely finished giving the kill order, before a bolt of death streaked across the sky. The predators were dialed in for this mission, mechanical in their calculation.

There were no cheers in the bridge, as the enemy scout erupted into fiery shrapnel. The Terrans were itching to fight, but the thrill of combat was lost with Earth. Perhaps the somberness was because they didn’t want to fail to defend Khoa, and relive what happened to their own home. Human empathy often was more of a nuisance to them than a boon.

It’s just a few minutes before the entire Federation fleet is in view. We’re

through the belt, and soon, it's show time.

Samantha sucked in a sharp breath. "There! That faint emerald dot must be Khoa."

My gaze shifted to the viewport. The sharp-eyed human must have distinguished the planet from the bountiful stars around us. White blips flashed near it, which were signs of the Mazics and the Federation exchanging fire. Donating several ship units to Earth's crusade had depleted local resources. It was likely the friendlies were stalling for time, in the hopes of a predator rescue.

The fact that the Mazics withstood the volume of enemies we saw in transit was miraculous. The humans knew time was of the essence. Captain Monahan ordered navigations to push the throttle past recommended output. Our fleet surged ahead, stone-colored armors rattling from the acceleration.

I turned back to my data feed, and watched as new information trickled in. The computer continued tagging friendlies, while racking up a separate tally of enemies. The number of hostiles stalled around two thousand, whereas the estimate I'd pulled from subspace readings was five times that number.

The machine wasn't counting any more contacts though, so it must be mistaken. The Mazics weren't martial geniuses; they couldn't have taken down that many ships. Also, there wasn't enough debris detected for that many casualties.

"Where are the rest of the Federation ships? Onso, don't tell me you applied sensor filters by mistake," I grumbled.

The Yotul snarled with indignation. "There are no filters on, dumbass. The ships are there, on your readout, accounted for!"

Tyler pursed his lips. "What do you mean by the rest of them?"

"The level of overlap, in the subspace readings," I replied. "It wouldn't be that messy unless there was a lot of activity. I'm talking several times the number you see under the hostile designation… sir."

The tall officer stroked the stubbly whiskers on his chin. He parsed through the data himself, and his expression grew deadly serious. Urgency flashed in his dark pupils, before he signaled our captain. Those predator instincts could draw tactical conclusions much faster than my own; humans acted before we even determined the

problem.

Actually, why didn't I have those instincts? Had those reflexes been written out of my genes by Kolshian experimenters, or a flesh deficiency? My eyes narrowed, before I turned my attention back to the bridge activity.

"It's a trap!" Tyler's skin morphed into a flushed shade of red, as blood pooled in his cheeks. Veins bulged from his temples, and his canines were bared in visceral alarm. "Captain, look for contacts on our six! They're hiding out there somewhere."

Monahan redirected power to shields, before relaying that conclusion to the fleet. The Terran ships undertook a gradual banking maneuver, ignoring bewildered chatter from the Mazics. The captain inspected the nearest astronomical bodies, and cross-referenced them with her star chart.

After a long pause, she pointed to a rocky planet. There was nothing I saw but a cratered surface. However, at this point, I trusted the predators' refined instincts. Our commander likely singled it out, because that's where she would've hidden a fleet with the roles reversed. Perhaps empathy wasn't a complete hindrance on the battlefield.

Samantha squinted. "The attack on Khoa was just bait. It's not worth it to subdue a single breakaway species. They want to keep our military crippled, and take out the Federation 'traitors' at the same time."

As if expressing agreement with her words, an array of ships zipped out from behind the gravimetric body. The Federation must've realized the element of surprise was lost, so that forced a head-on confrontation with the human fleet. Had they really saved an abundance of fresh reinforcements for us?

The predators brought their fleet into a defensive formation, as the first munitions were lobbed in our direction. The Kolshians must believe numbers tipped the scales in their favor; the Terrans hadn't held out the last time there was a disproportionate balance. This was a test of whether our rebuilt military could hold a candle to an ancient power.

Chapter 72

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: November 27, 2136

The Federation ambush fleet moseyed forward, with a faint semblance of strategy. The enemy were sticking in groups of four, so that the predators couldn't pick off lone vessels with their superior wit. Our opponents were also coordinating attacks on targets, aiming to gun down hapless humans with deadly crossfires. A standard UN vessel would be ripped apart from both sides before they knew what hit them.

The leading Terran ships had their shields obliterated in a few seconds; the plasma onslaught decimated exposed hulls. Any ordinary species would choose a desperate retreat, and regroup in an advantageous location. But instead, there was an icy calm across the bridge, at least, from the human crew. The Fissan on comms was whinnying in terror, the Venlil advisors were crying, and the Yotul at my station…was doing his job without issue. That was a surprise.

"Deploying tactical drones. Stay on the move!" a predatory voice on the radio barked.

The spacecraft carriers had a limited supply of autonomous craft, which were a Terran novelty. Unfortunately, most "drones" were lost during the defense of Earth; restocking the reserves was a challenge, with the manufacturing delays. Since humans were the only ones who possessed the innovation, and weren't keen on giving away their secrets, their newfound allies couldn't help on that front.

The predators trust no one, not truly. I can't say I blame them.

But even the few dozen drones we had at our disposal were a useful tool. They could undertake the riskiest maneuvers, without any concern for life and limb. The enemy was likely blindsided by the unmanned vessels, so they weren't equipped to deal with them. Manual targeting was a requisite, because the automatons were much smaller than standard ships.

The drones twirled through the sky, changing direction on a dime. There was no worrying about whether inertial dampeners could

keep up, with no crew aboard. Pinning down the nimble craft proved a challenge for prey operators, in real time. The Federation lobbed plasma at the inbound contacts, but the unmanned vehicles simply veered off at ninety-degree angles. The enemy hesitated, uncertain how to proceed.

Captain Monahan nodded to the weapons station. “Ready our armor-piercing missiles. Wait for the drones to land a few punches, and fire.”

Our spacecraft cruised ahead, falling in beside two lightweight gunships that appeared to be Tilfish impounds. The Terrans had outfitted the seized vessels with kinetic turrets on the hull. I wasn’t sure what impact that weaponry would have against shields. The humans should know efficacy was why plasma dominated space, despite the higher energy demands.

The drones coasted onward, anticipating Federation blows through predictive abilities. Perhaps the humans programmed algorithms to monitor power output and radio chatter. These robotic creations were a marvel of engineering, regardless. Whatever anyone said about the predators, nobody could doubt their wicked intelligence.

Our handful of automated craft flew circles around the larger forces, drawing within striking distance. The craft swooped in across the Federation’s front lines, and unloaded missiles from close range. Detonations buffeted the metal exteriors, crippling shields. With inhuman response time, the drones transitioned to a deluge of kinetics and mini-missiles.

“Hey, Gojid. Find us some targets,” Tyler snarled.

I monitored the sensor data, finding the ship groupings with the most sustained damage. The Federation army was hurling munitions at the drones in a blind frenzy; the enemy hoped the deluge would cut off escape. Brute force proved enough to whittle down our unmanned charge, by a significant margin. We had just a few seconds to capitalize on the discombobulation.

Scanning the readout, my eyes turned to a Federation bunch just out of range. This enemy squadron had lost a ship to the drones already, judging by the hefty debris. The remaining trio were slowed by an aged bomber with an inefficient drive signature; that meant they couldn’t pull off sudden movements. A lack of evasive abilities offered an easy mark for the humans.

I highlighted those three ships on the map. “There. You take out the faster escorts with a one-two punch, then that bomber is sitting prey.”

“Good call. We’re saving the weapons station a lot of guesswork,” Tyler responded.

The sensors officer passed along the information, before turning back to me. There was a gleam of interest in his eyes, which was something I didn’t want to encourage. Perhaps I was doing a little too well with my orders, for an alien?

Our strike force converged on the target, accelerating with malicious intent. The UN’s adopted gunships brought up our flanks, while we lined up a Federation cruiser. Our nemesis spotted our target-lock, and adjusted their course in an evasion attempt. We sent missiles barreling toward them all the same.

The trio deployed copious interceptors, leaving no chance of our warheads slipping through. As we reloaded for another missile volley, the UN gunship pair swooped in to ramp up the pressure. Our Terran allies got near enough for a closer look, then added their own explosives to the mix. The Federation took those out with no problem as well. The humans’ love for bombs was well-known to the galaxy, so that sparked the inclusion of a hefty stock of countermeasures.

But peculiarities on the sensor readings drew a second glance from me. The gunships’ missiles were counteracted, but the Federation ships were hedged within the blast radius. Shields should have absorbed the negligible hit; yet according to my screen, the shield capacity had vanished. Upon their destruction, the human explosives seemed to have generated a magnetic field.

Captain Monahan beckoned to the weapon station. “Shields are down…likely temporary. Hit them with kinetics now!”

The UN gunships must’ve been expecting the shield collapse too. Their turrets flickered to life, peppering enemy hulls with bullets. The kinetics ripped through the Federation’s armor, like it was wallpaper being peeled away. Our vessel contributed with well-placed strikes to the engine compartment. The hostiles were reduced to slag, trapped in the wake of their own drive failures.

“What just happened?” I breathed.

Onso wagged his tail, watching the viewport. “Ha, those fuckers got scienced! To put it plainly, we disrupted the shield current with magnetoresistance.”

My gaze darted over to Samantha, who bobbed her shoulders in confusion. How did an uplift understand a concept the Federation never thought of? Hell, it was beyond my own scientific knowledge, and I was a seasoned veteran. That uneducated Yotul must be parroting what the humans said.

The predators just rendered shields obsolete, which meant bullets were relevant again. Because of Earth’s bloody history, human militaries already excelled in kinetics. This development increased my confidence that we could tackle the larger fleet. It would be surprising if the Federation could recover from the shock of our strategy.

I think I’m looking at the most advanced military in the galaxy, I mused with a tinge of fear. *Yet humanity are in their spacefaring infancy.*

I chewed at my claws. “This is all new to me. Carlos, Sam, did you know this was going to happen?”

“I knew they picked a fight with the wrong people,” Samantha chimed in. “The Kolshians are the ringleaders; they wanted this. They’re going to be the first to pay.”

Carlos snorted. “Funny thing is, the aquatic bastards don’t have much choice but to fight. They can’t play both sides anymore. That plan, to pit us against the grays and mop up the winner, is toast thanks to Cilany.”

“No, I’m talking about the shields, you bloodthirsty beasts. That little…magnet bomb or whatever? It’s revolutionary.”

“Yeah, the ugly fucks aren’t damage sponges anymore,” Tyler interjected, uninvited. “We can one-hit them, and not have to recharge that blasted plasma gun. Never liked the concept myself.”

I snapped my head back to the viewport, giving the officer the cold shoulder. Out of my peripheral vision, it was plain to see his hand curl into a fist. The predator was seething from my continued insults; his commentary may have been a peace offering. This tension was all my fault, but I didn’t know what to do about our mutual acquaintance.

Carlos jabbed an elbow into my shoulder, shaking his head in

warning. I mimicked the humans' noncommittal gesture, by rolling my shoulders back. The male guard hissed in displeasure, before waving a hand dismissively. I wished Tyler would keep this all business, since there was a battle to focus on.

Our craft pivoted toward the heart of the action, as Monahan coordinated each station like a symphony conductor. Everyone piped up with input when prompted, and the humans put their hunting instincts to good use. The predators sensed weakness, which meant they wouldn't give the Federation a minute to breathe. The enemy was falling back toward the ambush site, condensing into a panicked wall.

I squinted at the sensors. "The enemy just dropped about ten percent of their fleet. That anti-shield mechanism is proving catastrophic."

Tyler scowled. "Catastrophic…?"

"Catastrophic, *sir*," I grunted, through gritted teeth. "Retreat is probable, if more imminent losses are in the cards. We need to inflict serious damage, fast."

"Captain's already working on that. Your analysis is spot on, but shit, you're a real hardass. I bet you're fun at parties."

"I don't remember what fun is, or what it's like to be happy. Not since the Arxur ate my family alive, while they screamed over a video call. Humans always try to make me talk about my past, so now you know!"

"Hey, settle down! Officer Cardona had nothing to do with that," Samantha hissed.

"I…I couldn't make myself hang up. But there was nothing I could do…I didn't say anything! Do you know how many times my daughter called my name? 'Help me, Daddy. Please, it hurts.' FUCK!"

The pain was still as fresh as the day it happened, like a knife cutting through my sternum. Everyone at our station gawked at me, including the feisty Yotul and my guards. Tyler was quiet, leaning over his console in thought. He scratched his sandy hair, perhaps envisioning my story. The hostility ebbed out of his posture, replaced by a pitying frown.

Shit, why did I say that? I don't want his pity, and I don't like talking

about my losses. Stop thinking about Marcel, you worthless predator.

Tears swelled in my eyes, and I pressed a paw to my mouth to stifle the choking sobs. After years of keeping it all bottled up, Cilany's revelation had me losing my mind. I was just like the demons that ate my little girl. Why couldn't I help her, if the shared malevolence was true? To top it off, instead of defending innocents in her memory, I had helped the Arxur get a leg up in the war.

Carlos gave my neck a soothing pat, just above my bristling spines. "I told them you needed a psych eval. You're not well."

"I agree. I don't know who the hell cleared you for combat, when it's obvious you're unfit for duty." Tyler took a deep breath, and met my eyes. "My condolences for what happened to you, truly. But I think it's best that you're removed from this post."

I glowered at the officer. "I can do my job, and well. Helping humans is all I have left! Just skip social hour and I'll be fine, damnit. Er, please…sir."

The sandy-haired human turned to the viewport, watching as the Terran fleet charged the enemy. There wasn't time to get a replacement for me; plasma would be flying at us any second. For all my flaws, I was more competent than most aliens. Captain Monahan even admitted I was a knowledgeable addition to the crew.

"We need to inflict serious damage? Find us the path of least resistance into missile range," Tyler decided. "Keep an eye on the surviving drones."

I wiped the snot from my nose. "Thank you, sir."

The Federation enemies on screen were retreating, conceding space bit by bit. Our opponents hoped to keep some distance between us with cycles of railgun fire. They knew if we got close enough, they were finished. Despite our recent progress, a direct plasma hit was more than capable of chewing through a UN vessel.

Keeping human predators at bay was easier said than done; danger served more as an incentive than discouragement. Our drone force was in tatters, but the remnants limped forward to clear the path. The Terran fleet used them as a buffer, distracting the railguns. Automatons were a new variable for the Federation, and those bastards hated the unknown. Therefore, the prey focused an

inordinate amount of fire on the robots.

The Mazics were still duking it out with the initial force behind us, churning up carnage around Khoa. That predicament was another reason for the UN to expedite the initiative; the humans charged enemy ranks with fervor. A few hostiles began to target the manned craft, once we got too close for their liking. Plasma descended on our position at magnificent velocities, with one beam clipping our belly.

The ship floorboards rocked beneath my feet, and the shields struggled to absorb the shave. Propulsion was wonky for a moment, while the fluorescent lights flickered overhead. The Federation must've realized their volley connected with us, because target-locks lit up my screen. One enemy's energy output dipped slightly, which raised my spines.

"BANK! NOW, OR WE'RE DEAD!" I roared.

Navigations struggled to get our systems responsive again. At Captain Monahan's order, the humans diverted power from comms, weapons, and most importantly, shields. Our safeguards weren't going to withstand another blast regardless, but it was awful to have all defenses stripped away. Every second our craft sat idle felt like an eternity.

A burst of light zipped across the sky like a lightning bolt, and I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a part of me that was relieved to be on the way out; stewing in my emotions had become too exhausting. Besides, the world would be better off without a predator like me. The downside of my imminent demise was the humans that would perish alongside me.

Maybe there's an afterlife. Maybe I can see my family again…and so can Sam.

Our thrusters sputtered to life, coughing out the surplus energy. Our ship lurched to the side, with inertial dampeners cushioning the sharp turns by a fraction. We almost veered into an allied ship, who swerved from our path with a second to spare. The plasma beam whisked by our haunches, culminating in a narrow miss.

"Well, would the sensors station like to command this ship? Any more unsanctioned orders for my crew?" Captain Monahan chuckled.

I drew a shuddering breath. “Have your drones and lighter craft feint to the near flank, then bank center at the last moment. The Federation don’t react like humans.”

“That was a rhetorical question. Though, I like your idea. We could afford to mix up our playbook…keep them on their toes.”

The human captain huddled over her microphone, though I couldn’t tell what she said to our allies. The pack predators were able to act in harmony amidst chaos; their precision and teamwork were unrivaled. The Terran fleet fanned out, and coordinated return plasma fire. Ferocious lights shone around us, with the radiance of a supernova.

The counterstrike put a muzzle on the Federation’s offense, for a moment. Hundreds of Terran ships plunged toward their right flank, spitting munitions to sell the maneuver. We had sustained minimal losses to our fleet, and still had enough willpower to march ahead. All we needed was for the enemy to commit, before we could spring the magnetic field on our true mark.

The cornered prey felt vulnerable, on the fringes of their formation. Several vessels reversed course and huddled together for safety, as the avalanche of human weaponry continued. There were the faulty instincts at work again. Convinced of the Terran targets, the Federation arranged their fire to push us away from the flank.

“Throw both gravity missiles we’ve got at them, then follow up with our nuclear warhead. After that…spew kinetics at anything that survives!” Monahan barked.

The bridge crew leapt to carry out her orders, and the restabilized propulsions had us bank sharply. The UN advance hooked back at a retreating angle, and we glided perpendicular to the enemy wall. Weapons readied their new targets, before we snaked into the formation’s heart. It was easy to picture the startled Federation crew, frozen in terror.

A cascade of missiles drove their way into our nemesis’ soft spot; sensor data showed shields faltering and armor disintegrating. The battlefield fell into complete disorder, as the predators lunged forward for the kill. Kinetics spliced up shaken ships, and clean plasma dispatched any that limped along.

The Federation hurled a few stray munitions at us, with a dying

whimper. The fools had no time to assess targets, and in their fearful state, a drunk toddler could aim better. I doubted most of them had close-range weapons or interceptors ready. The humans humiliated the traditional craft, besting them with savage cunning.

With the ambush backfiring so horrifically, our enemies could have but one collective thought. Reeling from the loss of another thousand vessels, the Federation spacecraft banked away for a full retreat. But the Mazics were still engaged in the fight of their lives behind us, with the lesser contingent. The enemy bombers were almost within orbital range.

All that was left now was for the humans to secure Khoa, restoring order for its rightful inhabitants.

Chapter 73

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: November 27, 2136

The shuttle was crammed full of predators, so much so, that several humans were standing throughout the bumpy ride. I was lucky that I could curl up in Marcel's lap; the red-haired vegetarian had a steely glint in his eyes. I hadn't seen this much apprehension in him, not even during the Gojid cradle's chaos. Something about the Tilfish seemed to inspire fear in Terrans, without an apparent reason.

The superocean was visible on the horizon, as we descended on the sole continent of planet Sillis. The Terran pilots appeared to be half-expecting the natives to shoot our transport down. The United Nations had officially accepted the Tilfish surrender, today; this was the start of bringing their territory under human control. It was possible that we'd see combat, but on paper, our interactions should be restricted to civilian policing.

Marcel grew restless after Earth's raid, especially once he heard that my redeployment was requested. There was no hesitation from me, to put in formal consent papers to the Venlil government. Oddly enough, I'd begun to feel comfortable around the rowdy predators; living in close quarters with grown beasts was the new normal. The anti-instinct training made me feel empowered for the first time in my life, and I wanted to prove that I was a changed man.

It is awesome that my buddy has recovered, and decided to come with me. After what the Krakotl did, retiring on the homefront is out of the question.

I cleared my throat. "What do you think about races like the Tilfish being predators, Marc? We haven't really talked about it."

"It makes a lot more sense than everyone but us and the grays being obligate herbivores," Marcel growled. "But, they're not predators, Slanek. And it doesn't change the fact that they participated in the murder of a billion people."

I straightened my blinders with a paw. "Maybe it's possible to reverse the cure though. Humans already started studying the Gojid genome."

When Cilany's broadcast arrived back on Earth, it was plastered across every news feed. Terran discussion panels had mixed opinions on alien victimhood, but the "cure" was something all of them lambasted. The Kolshians found themselves vying for public enemy number one. Even the more xenophobic humans considered allying with any converted race that would take the fight to Aafa.

Whatever ties the Venlil still had to the Federation, the conspiracy reframed our stance. How could the Federation mastermind such a heinous crime, as altering species' identity, for centuries? None of their atrocities had ever been defensible, in my eyes, but I had believed their intentions were good. Every act of bigotry was an attempt to protect their citizens from a malevolent enemy.

Marcel inspected my far-away expression. "Do you feel sorry for the cured races?"

"I don't know. There's some things about humans that bother me, but I tried to accept you," I said. "What right do I have to impose my evolution on you? To erase your history and beliefs? These species lost everything that makes them…well, themselves."

"You're right. It's a cultural genocide that was thoroughly executed, without anyone's knowledge or consent. I shudder to think what would've happened to humanity, if they found us before the Arxur."

I couldn't imagine the predators, reduced to terrified prey; stripped of the resilience and aggression that defined them. It wasn't clear to me if violent instincts could be written out of the human genome, or how the Kolshians might've worked around the binocular eyes. Would cultural indoctrination stick to such a strong-willed species?

The Terran transport touched down on a landing pad, following Tilfish signals. I was relieved that we'd set this spacecraft on the ground, rather than jumping out of it. The UN troops unloaded, grimacing as wind gusts buffeted their faces. Sillis was known for its stormy, tumultuous weather, which was fueled by the panthalassa.

A lone Tilfish waited for us, scuttling back and forth with anxiety. "H-hello, humans. I brought…gifts."

The insectoid gestured with one of her six legs to fruit baskets, which included local jams and preserves. She cowed her glistening head, as several Terrans trained guns on her. Her antennae quivered, anticipating her swift demise. The poor thing was

surrounded by predators; forward-facing eyes were angled at her in all directions.

Why did her species send her here alone? This is cruel.

“Thanks for the gifts. Who are you?” I asked.

Tears bordered her smooth eyes. “I’m…G-General Birla. Ambassador D-Dwirl made me come. I am the only one…who, uh, v-voted against…Earth attack…”

The UN soldiers relaxed, but shared a few rattled glances of their own. Several were huddling near the shuttle, distancing themselves from Birla. The faint hairs on Marcel’s arm stood upright, and he ruffled my ears for comfort. I coaxed him forward, bringing us across from the Tilfish.

“Slanek, what are you doing?” the human hissed.

My ears pinned back. “Face your fears, right? That’s what I did with you. This is no different.”

General Birla bent lower to the ground, unable to look the human in the eye. A ripple passed through Marcel’s throat, before he narrowed his pupils. The human extended a trembling hand, keeping his palm flat. The Tilfish must’ve been briefed on Terran mannerisms, because she placed a delicate leg atop his fingers.

“Well, at least someone on this rock has a conscience,” the vegetarian wheezed, jerking his arm back. “Where can we set up shop? With any luck, the ground occupation will get rolled back soon.”

Birla flicked her antennae in the city’s direction. “F-follow me. Please. The—there’s a few things you should know.”

Marcel tucked his hands behind his back, trying to look formal as the squad leader. The medals on his chest were recent adornments. The new Secretary-General issued them to anyone wounded in defense of Earth or the cradle. I couldn’t think of anyone who deserved a commendation more than my friend.

“Go on, he’s listening,” I chimed in. “Is there something to be concerned about, General?”

Birla clicked her mandibles. “We’re…having t-trouble with unrest and dissidents. M-mass protests…many people don’t want a human invasion.”

Marcel raised his eyebrows. “That doesn’t surprise me at all. How bad is it?”

“The exterminators pulled t-together some rogue generals. They’re offering a bounty for every human killed. We’d deal with it, but the surrendering members complied with your disarmament demands.”

“And the anti-human factions didn’t hand over their weapons, leaving your government with no way to stop them.”

“Exactly. L-look, not every p-protestor is violent…there’s demonstrations everywhere, like I said. I don’t know if you allow such things, b-but…”

“Last I checked, the UN affirms the right to free speech. But we may impose martial law, until things settle down.”

The Tilfish general shuddered with relief, before climbing onto a monorail train. The insectoid retreated to the furthest corner as the Terrans piled in, and automated doors sealed us in the tight space. Marcel ensured that all equipment was brought aboard, before leaning against a wall. I nuzzled his elbow, desperate for attention.

The human smiled, as he tickled my chin. “You are still adorable, Slanek. You could get away with anything.”

“Anything?” I repeated, with a devious ear flick. “What if I told the Tilfish that you want to give her a belly rub?”

“No! You little shit…you wouldn’t.”

I didn’t respond, turning to the window with a contented stare. Marcel withdrew his hand, crossing his arms with an irritated huff. The vegetarian noted the mirth in my eyes, as the supersonic train hurtled along. But the playfulness seeped out of my demeanor, once I caught glimpses of the chaos.

Judging by the corpses in the streets, stampeding began prior to our arrival. The human soldiers peered out the windows, though the carnage was an unfocused blur. Bringing a predator military to a homeworld inspired panic, especially for the stated purpose of an occupation. The grisly sight reminded me of the cradle, when we rescued Nulia.

Whatever the Tilfish once were, this is not hunter behavior. The public sure isn’t lumping themselves in with humans.

General Birla twisted her antennae, scrutinizing the predators’

responses. I half-expected Marcel to stop the train, and rush off to help the victims. Instead, the red-haired human pursed his lips with discomfort. Our top priority was subduing the populace, and making the area safe for Terran travel.

The train glided to its stopping point, a terminal which emptied into a city square. The humans continued to gawk at the scenery, while clutching their guns tighter. Tilfish protestors were packed into the square; the ones that hadn't fled the settlement came out as a welcoming party. Insect bodies spanned as far as the eye could see.

"Good grief. We've got to get them to disperse," Marcel muttered. "A gathering of this size, in our faces…"

The vegetarian conferred with several comrades, before the grunts began assembling equipment. I hoped there was non-lethal weaponry in their cache. These were civilians exercising sapient rights Earth validated. It would disappoint me if humanity began their reign by squashing all expression.

General Birla clicked her mandibles. "You n-need a way through the crowd? We s-saved armored vehicles for you. Please…n-no massacre."

"Will humans even fit in your trucks?" Marcel asked, with raised eyebrows. "I can't imagine your sitting arrangements are meant for us. These train seats look like step-stools with six tiny holes inserted."

"We replaced t-the upholstery with biped-designed seats. Like we use with Venlil or Kolshian guests."

The Terran soldiers lugged some sort of speaker out of the train. The predators clambered atop a vehicle's hood, and secured the acoustic device to the roof. Marcel hopped into the flatbed, which I took as my cue to follow. These trucks were not self-driving like the ones on Earth; another human moved behind the wheel.

Tilfish protestors jeered at the sight of us. Several individuals sported homemade exterminator gear; lighters and matches were among "weapons" I saw. My human shouted for every friendly to stay behind the truck, before bringing a microphone to his mouth.

"Please return to your homes," Marcel barked. "Martial law is in effect until further notice. Public gatherings are not permitted until the United Nations has secured the area. Locally-sanctioned curfews

will be enforced."

"Die, predator scum!" a voice shrieked.

More followed in quick succession. "We're not like you, no matter what any Kolshian says!"

"I will not be your cattle."

"Human filth don't belong on Sillis. BURN!"

Chants of 'Burn' swept across the gathering, and the agitated protestors closed on our position. This was no longer about sapient rights; the situation changed the second they threatened my friends. Nobody was going to torch my human alive. The thought of him suffering again twisted my heart.

The blinders were helpful in narrowing the scope of the incident. I focused on compartmentalizing my emotions, listing the facts to myself. We were the ones with guns, backed by a predator army. Even if the situation worsened, all I needed to do was pick off a single target.

You can do this, Slanek. Your fear does not control your actions. You want to protect Marc.

I raised my gun with a steady grip, but Marcel's eyes widened in alarm. He pushed the barrel down with a palm, shaking his head. My ears pinned back, not sure why the human stopped me from defending myself. Wasn't that what they wanted me to do?

"Killing should be a last resort," the vegetarian hissed. "Always. Life is a precious thing. Non-lethal options are going to be exhausted first."

Marcel fiddled with the settings on his speaker. There was nothing audible to my sensitive ears, but waves of Tilfish halted in their tracks. The insects began clutching audio sensors, and some vomited. The device must be concentrating amplified sound in a narrow beam; none of the humans behind the truck were affected.

There was the verdict: Terrans weaponized everything. Marcel, as gentle as he was, had planned for the eventuality of disorder from the beginning. I imagined he'd also brought other tools in case the sonic attack didn't work. The predators always had a backup plan or a contingency, since I'd worked with them.

UN soldiers began firing grenades into the crowd, which drew a

cacophony of screams. But rather than maiming the civilians, it dispersed a milky gas into the air. I wondered if it was a sleeping vapor, at first. The effects kicked in almost immediately, leaving Tilfish crying and coughing. Blinded, several staggered out of the gas cloud in a loopy panic.

I winced with sympathy at the collapsed bodies, recognizing that they were in severe pain. Perhaps the unruly Tilfish would take this as proof of human cruelty, but I saw it for what it was. It was an attempt to incapacitate a hostile group, without any desire to kill civilians. These measures flourished on Earth, due to the violence of Terran stampedes.

Marcel cleared his throat. “Please disperse. We do not wish to arrest or harm anyone. A designated time will be set to air grievances in a civilized manner.”

The vegetarian spoke in an impassive voice, like this was an ordinary decree. Some Tilfish heeded his warning this time, trying to escape the jam-packed square. The agonizing weapons must’ve made them rethink swarming the predator’s locale.

The humans took the crowd’s disorientation as a chance to push forward. Our vehicles rolled ahead, with a line of soldiers leading the way. UN guards in stampede gear began grabbing a few Tilfish, and wrangled them into custody. Unwilling insects were hauled away from their friends, shrieking and writhing.

Marcel repeated his warning about the planet being under Terran control. The sight of advancing predators, bulked up from head-to-toe, was enough to spark flight responses in all but the boldest few. With the civilians flushed out of our immediate vicinity, we could find a campsite.

“You are efficient,” General Birla decided. “Much more organized than the grays. And you took p-prisoners…”

Humor flickered in my human’s eyes. “We’re not going to execute people off the streets, if that’s what you’re implying. Our job is to stabilize the region, and integrate Sillis as a UN vassal.”

“What does our planet look like under your rule? I w-worry about being beholden to predators. Especially if…we are what they say. We might, uh, regress.”

“Annexation comes with certain rights and privileges, unlike total

war. We're not forcing anyone to modify their lifestyle or beliefs."

For all the baseless fears, of human predation being contagious, not a single Venlil in the exchange program developed an appetite for murder. What I had been forced to do was broaden my horizons. Earth was untamed and dangerous; the perilous environment helped me modify my beliefs.

The idea of controlling my instincts, and tolerating some risk, became palatable. I achieved feats I didn't know were possible, for someone of a meek disposition. Humans challenged my preconceptions at every turn. Their friendship and their empathy, how my bond with Marcel was close as family…that impacted me more than binocular eyes ever could.

"Getting paired with Marcel is the best thing that ever happened to me," I said. "He is patient and kind. You can trust him."

The human bared his teeth. "Thanks, buddy. We make a good team."

Our exchange hadn't convinced the Tilfish general, but I saw hope in her story. A single official had the conviction to stand up for the predators; to believe that they deserved to live. Sillis had been relinquished without a drop of bloodshed so far. Even if it was a disproportionate balance, some civilians could come around.

Marcel outlined plans for humanity to cement a foothold in the city, and gather a tally of its populace. The masses were in shock from Cilany's interview; they needed help deriving meaning. We'd spend a few days getting settled, before we reclaimed rogue areas. Havens for anti-human extermination officers and military leaders were the real issue.

Clearing those territories might be where the Terrans summoned their lethal arsenal. The United Nations would have this newly-conquered world brought to heel, one way or another.

Chapter 74

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: November 28, 2136

It shouldn't have been complicated for species to denounce the Federation's actions. The issue was that some saw the gene rewrites as merciful, and couldn't pinpoint the moral conundrum. The United Nations opened their doors to former omnivores, launching genetic research and sharing biology lessons. As the Venlil always did, we placed our full support behind the predators' actions.

Launching the lab-grown meat initiative proved easy, with some quick thinking from Terran diplomats. Human refugees worked the operation, and passed it off as a desperate attempt to feed Earth. It was announced later that the predators were selflessly handing over their food supply, in a deal they brokered with the Arxur. I wasn't involved at all, so the political blowback might pass over me.

If this exchange goes smoothly, humanity will be able to say that they rescued millions of Venlil.

Using frozen cell samples from Earth, we'd churned up enough meat for the trade. It was a sickening process, but I reminded myself of the cause. The Terrans facilitated the release of Arxur prisoners from the cradle as well; our side of the bargain was upheld. I was stuck waiting anxiously for the results, with Noah and Sara.

Hospitals across the habitable zone were prepping for the influx of patients. Many humans volunteered to help the rescued Venlil, but they were ordered to wear full concealment gear at all times. We didn't want the former cattle assuming they were transferred from one predator's custody to another.

Sara squeezed my shoulders reassuringly. "Your people will be here any minute. We have no reason to assume that Isif will betray us."

"I don't know about trusting an Arxur," Noah growled. "True herbivores like the Venlil must have a lower status than ever, with the recent news. The Dominion could decree that they belong as cattle."

I took a shuddering breath. "Noah is right. Why hasn't General Kam

communicated anything? Did the grays attack us?"

With uncanny timing, my holopad buzzed in my grip. It appeared to be the Venlil military frequency, with the right encryption and validations. My prosthetic tail bunched up with anticipation, and I tried for a placid expression. News of a successful rescue would be a welcome sound.

The face that flickered onto the vid screen was no Venlil though. It was the scaly visage of an Arxur, with slit pupils directed on camera. Fear rippled through my veins; I wondered why we were being contacted by a reptilian. It took a substantial effort to soothe myself, reminding my brain that the predator couldn't attack through a holopad. Once I got my bearings, I used a chipped tooth to identify the creature as Isif.

"C-chief Hunter?" My voice sounded more like a question, but I managed to gasp out the words. "Was there something wrong with the parcel? T-the humans meted out the allot—"

The Arxur leaned back. "No, everything went smoothly. The liberated cattle were sent to an abandoned colony, where your people picked them up. Your transports are approaching Venlil Prime now, so I would make preparations."

"Okay…good. How did you access this c-channel? And why?"

"Study and observation. Venlil ships have poor security protocol. I mean no insult, it's a simple fact. Anyways, I wished to thank you for your cooperation."

The reptilian growled with discomfort, avoiding eye contact. It was clear he'd never extended gratitude before. Assuming he spoke the truth, it was a relief to hear that everything had gone according to plan. I was nervous about announcing the result to the public; the humans needed to dress the news up with a meticulous brush.

"I j-just wanted…to free my people. No sapient creature deserves to live like that," I stuttered.

Isif curled his lip. "I have never liked what we do. The news from Aafa, you know what I'm referring to, is a gut punch. Some in the Dominion are moving the goalposts to what qualifies as a predator, but not everyone is alright with eating 'true sapients.' Not my words."

"You don't seem torn up about your diet."

“I already believed that we were eating ‘true sapients’, Governor. I must dissociate myself from such matters. When there is no choice, responsibility cannot be assigned. It did surprise me that the Arxur are not the first victims…but it does not impact my judgment.”

“Victims? The Arxur?”

“One can be both a victim and an oppressor. Your kind, my kind, we are alike in that way. Life is complex.”

The Arxur scanned the camera frame, noting the humans in the background. Outrage flashed in his eyes, as he saw the obfuscating gear. Nobody forced Noah and Sara to hide; the United Nations agreed that freed cattle wouldn’t befriend predators. They chose to help the traumatized souls despite those hurdles.

“I confess, I had another reason for this call. Secretary-General Zhao is not a man of words,” Isif growled. “I knew if I contacted Tarva, I could cut through the red tape. Get on the line with UN diplomats, yes?”

Sara shrugged. “I’m a scientist, who happened to be on the first contact team. My expertise is biology and environmental science, not politics.”

“I’m the Venlil ambassador, but only because I led the first contact mission. No one expected to chat with extraterrestrial life. I’m not trained for this either,” Noah agreed.

The Arxur lashed his tail. “Noah and Sara…I know of you both, and I do not care about your experience levels. Humanity’s handling of the subjugated worlds is shaving scales back on Wriss, not in a good way. Claiming Tilfish territory as your jurisdiction, and demanding that we stand down?”

“The Tilfish surrendered to us,” Noah retorted. “The Arxur shouldn’t be attacking anyone on our side.”

The Chief Hunter flared his nostrils, and threw a sideways glance at me for support. I offered a submissive tail swish. The last thing I wanted was to get involved in a dispute between humanity and the Arxur. That said, I was surprised that the United Nations hadn’t allowed their carnivore “friends” to finish the glassing. Sworn enemies weren’t worth a deadly confrontation with the grays.

Isif’s eyes narrowed to intimidating slits. “Let me restate the issue. I am in charge of only one sector, and by taking Sillis, you pissed off

another Chief Hunter. One who's not as forgiving, charming, and flexible as myself."

Noah jabbed a finger at the screen. "Tell that commander conquering a surrendered state is the human way. We do things differently."

"Try again. I need a convincing reason not to ignore your tactless decree. We could finish the orbital campaign, regardless of human presence. For the life of me, I do not see a reason to spare someone who attempted your extinction. We should kill the Tilfish, and the Harchen too."

"Glassing resources, that could be under our control, is just wasteful. Whether you want a planet for food, precious metals, labor, or fuel, conquest keeps everything at your disposal, *forever*. We are willing to provide the Arxur with compensation…a slice of the pie."

"Not to mention, the Tilfish are former omnivores. The more data we have on the Kolshian's 'cure', the more we can learn about the Arxur's history," Sara chimed in. "We can protect ourselves, in case the Federation attempts to use biological warfare again."

The Chief Hunter scrutinized the humans for several seconds. Earth needed to discover a way to reverse the modifications, if only to safeguard themselves. Helping altered species recover their natural state was a bonus.

"Duly noted. I will convey your desire for a larger, sustainable catch," Isif said. "Take care. Good luck with your rescue, Governor Tarva."

I flicked my new tail. "I l-look forward to our next conversation, C-Chief Hunter Isif."

The Arxur ended the transmission, and I fell back into Noah's strong arms for comfort. With the cattle en route to the hospital, I had to pull myself together quickly. Anything that would shatter the impression of safety had to be concealed. The humans understood this program was about those poor souls…millions of them.

We've never done anything on this scale. Reintegrating these broken Venlil might be more difficult than the exchange part.

Multiple transports docked at the drop-off area of the hospital. Venlil medical professionals barked orders, with an assertiveness

that might've come from humans. Even the rescues without visible injuries were brought to a hospital room, for check-ups and therapy. Noah and Sara checked their gear, as we heard gurneys rolling down the hallway.

The Venlil pair that were rolled into our room were a sorry sight; sympathy stabbed at my heart. Their fur was mangy and matted, soot-colored from grime accrual. Both of their eyes were glassy, unresponsive to any stimuli. I could see brands torched into their neck, similar to the script I'd seen on Isif's keyboard.

Noah and Sara rushed to lift each Venlil onto a bed. The first patient screamed at their touch. The predators flinched from the noise, before massaging her neck with calming intent. They hoisted the rescue onto the mattress, affected by her pitiful bleats. The two Terrans fluffed the pillow, and swaddled her in a blanket like a baby.

"You're safe now," Sara whispered. "We're coming right back."

The humans walked to the other rescue assigned to us, a male. They made sure to approach head-on, forgetting that our peripheral vision was expansive. The Venlil shook as they picked him up, digging his claws into Sara's hair. The Terran scientist disregarded the poking sensation, and stroked his pinned-back ears gently.

"This is home, Venlil Prime. We can reunite you with your families." Noah spoke in a higher voice than normal, trying not to growl. "We're going to help you. Can you tell me your names?"

The male rescue shuddered. "One…f-five…"

"No, that is *not* your name. You're not a number; you're a person. With hopes, dreams, and a future."

"I t-think I…used to b-be called…Glim. Glim."

The Terrans dipped their heads, and Sara scrawled the name on his bedside chart. She retrieved a water glass, tensing as Glim lapped the liquid like an animal. I sprang into action, offering water to the female Venlil. She was rocking back and forth in the blankets, teary eyes sealed shut. It must be overwhelming, to return to society after so long.

I retrieved a brush, and began to untangle her curly fur. It reminded me of how I used to comb my daughter's neck, while her father packed her lunch for school. Forcing that memory away, I got to

work on the testy knots. The rescued Venlil went stiff as a board, sinking back into a listless state.

“You can rest if you want. You’re safe, really,” I murmured.

Her eyes reflected the harsh, artificial light. “I k-know you. V-venlil ambassador T-tarva. I know you…”

“Yes, I am Tarva. I’m the homeworld governor now. I’d love to hear your name.”

“Haysi. W-we met…you probably don’t r-remember. I ran the Venlil Museum of History, used to ask you for F-Federation grants. Yes… that’s right. It’s like t-that was someone else.”

That did strike a faint recollection from my mind. Noah’s breath hitched, belying his concern. Perhaps that was in reaction to her strained voice, which sounded raw from disuse. Her words lacked the warm cadence of the Venlil dialect.

“Haysi, I’m glad that we met again. That person was you, not anybody else,” I said. “I’m sure the Museum would love to have you back, when you get better. You’re going to get better.”

It was touching to see how patient the predators were, with empathy on par with my own. Sara followed my example, untangling Glim’s pelt. A wash would do the two Venlil good, allowing them to feel sapient again. The Arxur had stripped these poor souls of their dignity, and a little grooming might return some normalcy.

Noah knelt by Glim’s bed, squeezing his paw gently. “What was your old profession, buddy? Maybe we can get you back in the field too.”

“D-dangerous…how I got captured,” the Venlil stammered. “Colony work, I t-think.”

“We’re starting our own colonies now. Sent out a few ark ships after, er, never mind. Do you remember the specifics of your work?

“P-preparing untamed areas for habitation. Extermination officer.”

The human ambassador jerked back, like Glim had struck him in the chin. Sara paused at the brushing task, and processed the new information. If this individual was someone who killed predators before his capture, there was no reason to think Arxur mistreatment changed his stance. I could imagine Glim’s absolute horror, when he

realized who he was speaking to.

For a second, I thought both humans were going to abandon the assignment. The two of them would feel uncomfortable, at best, caring for a predator-killer. It would make sense if the Terrans requested a transfer, and found someone more suitable to work with. Noah took several deep breaths, before rising to his full height.

“Extermination officer, huh? That’s a controversial profession, these days,” the human said.

Glim squinted. “Controversial? W-why?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We’ll fill you in on recent events later, but there’s no need to rush your readjustment.”

The extermination officer seemed unsatisfied with that answer, but he didn’t press Noah further. It was a positive sign to see a spark of interest, however fleeting. Curiosity would give the rescues back their agency. But I could only imagine their reactions, when they discovered our close alliance with predator neighbors.

Predator neighbors who were supposed to be dead. And were written off as warlike monsters.

“Who are you? W-why do you cover your face?” Haysi squeaked. “I don’t recognize you.”

Sara cleared her throat. “We’re, um, Gaians. This mask is a cultural thing, as is the attire. We made first contact with the Venlil Republic four months ago.”

“You discovered FTL on your own? Before the Federation found you?”

“Yes. Sort of.”

Both Venlil studied the ‘Gaians’ with confusion. Any intelligent being would notice the pieces weren’t adding up. As much as I wanted to welcome the former cattle back to our society, the humans presented a challenge. It was difficult enough for normal Republic citizens to tolerate our unique friends.

I hoped the Terrans could find a way to keep the truth under wraps, for the time being.

Chapter 75

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: November 28, 2136

An observer that only witnessed the clash between the Federation coalition and the humans wouldn't notice the Kolshians' strength. But watching Commonwealth heavyweights scrap with the Mazics, it was clear they knew more about martial policy than they let on. Their fleet stayed on the move, with tactics that bordered on predatory. One ship would distract a defending vessel, while others flanked it and cut it off from its allies.

The Mazics had several disadvantages, to make matters worse. They were tied to the defense of Khoa, similar to humanity's pitfall while protecting Earth. Their ships were also large and slow-moving, as they had to be spacious enough to accommodate the bulky mammals. Speedy cruisers, like Slanek and Marcel's patrol boat, didn't exist in their arsenal.

Tyler straightened his jacket. "Gojid, what's the situation? Friendly casualties?"

"The Kolshians managed some lucky hits with the ambush fleet. Our tally's down about a hundred, give or take."

"I should've clarified. I was asking about the Mazics. Optically, it looks like they're getting overrun on the viewport."

"Good news? The enemy were holding back, until we got here. Needed to drag this on long enough to lure us in. But the Mazics are getting their teeth kicked in, sir. Point defenses are inoperable on both lunar satellites, and their ship count is bleeding."

Onso maneuvered the viewport, while his reddish ears pricked up. Our warship was blazing toward Khoa's orbit with the rest of the UN fleet. The lush vegetation across the planet was mixed with city lights, without any ashen patches. Sensors confirmed what my eyes told me, with no signs of residue from a bomb. The six billion souls on world were safe, for now.

However, Federation vessels were encroaching on the Mazic's inner sanctum. Friendly resistance had become negligible, the marker of

an overwhelming defeat. Escape pods were jettisoned from a few craft, but the Kolshians pounced on any they saw. It was bizarre to watch a true herbivore receive predator treatment, just for defecting.

I hope Venlil Prime is heavily fortified. They must be viewed as the biggest traitors of all…the ones to blame for humanity's survival.

Tyler bit his lip. "This reminds me of Earth. We were powerless to stop them. When our air was venting, and the captain ordered us to abandon ship…I knew we lost. I—"

"You thought it was the end of humanity," Onso finished. "I'm sorry."

"Me too. Makes me nostalgic for the cradle, and that was a fucking warzone."

Carlos nodded. "It was all simpler then. Sam and I were stationed at the Hague during the cradle landing."

"Yeah, guard duty was better than playing war crime bingo," Samantha snorted. "Wonder if we're ever going to fry…sorry, *try* those bird bastards. Freudian slip."

Something flashed in the sandy-haired officer's eyes. Tyler's gaze darted over to me, and lingered for a long moment. The tall guy swallowed hard, looking rather distracted. The Yotul seemed clueless to his friend's deliberation, but I wondered if Marcel's packmate had stumbled upon my identity. My guards' previous post implied they would've at least sighted Gojid criminals.

Carlos pinched his nose. "Where are you going to find an impartial jury? Or a legal defender?"

"Do the dumplings even deserve a trial at all?" The female guard bared her teeth, darkness swirling in her green eyes. "I think they should commit suicide…you know, by bullet to the back of the head."

"We don't execute POWs! Sam, sometimes I really hope you're being facetious."

"Yeah, my bad, I guess the rights of murderers are a priority. A billion civvies dead is just a statistic, right?"

As the UN guards bickered, Captain Monahan did a sweep of the bridge. Every station was in smooth order, ready for another bout of

battle. Both the Kolshians and the Mazics had noticed our approach; friendlies were flooding our comms station with pleas. It must be difficult for humans to sort out which regions carried the highest importance.

“Do we have an intercept course…Gojid?” Tyler opened and clenched his fist, glowering at his console. “Or should I say, *Sovlin.*”

I blinked. “Um, sir…”

“DO YOUR JOB! We’ll deal with this later.”

My heart leapt up into my throat, and fear slowed my thought process. Humans hadn’t caused spine bristling in awhile, but my brain knew Tyler was a threat. I never meant for the sandy-haired officer to identify me. All I wanted was to help the UN win this battle, and achieve retribution.

Samantha and Carlos abandoned their squabble. The male guard tensed up, in case Tyler moved to assault me. While I was grateful that he was willing to protect me, I didn’t want his interference. A beating from Marcel’s packmate was the least I deserved; if anything, I wished the herbivore human had struck me during his visit.

Onso gawked at me. “You two know each other?”

“Not—”

“Did I authorize you to chat?” Tyler snarled. “Where the fuck are those intercept routes?”

The Yotul ducked his head. “S-sorry, my friend. I’ve never seen you act like this…it’s making me uncomfortable.”

“Not you. You can talk as much as you want, Onso. I need a distraction from this chucklefuck.”

Tyler squeezed his eyes shut, but his knuckles were turning white. I don’t think the big guy realized he was granting a peek of his canines. Captain Monahan drifted past the sensors station, and worry creases lined her forehead. Our commander must’ve picked up on the tension, because she hovered by us for an extra second.

“Status report.” Monahan cleared her throat, rapping the desk. “Got anything for navigations? I’m concerned we might be too late for Khoa.”

I squinted at the readout, and chewed at my claws. “N-no viable

intercept courses. We can't get there in time. S-several Federation ships are minutes from orbital range."

"What if the Mazics stop them, or slow them down?"

"Ma'am, the Mazics are all but dead in the water. I used to…believe the Federation would never bomb their own. I fear that's wishful thinking these days."

The Terran captain meandered back to her chair, with a thoughtful expression. My gaze focused on the viewport, trying to block out Tyler's sideways looks. If nobody was removing me from my duties, I wasn't going to broach the topic. A predator like myself could be helpful to Khoa's defense; this was the only way I could justify my existence.

Our warship cruised ahead, well above recommended acceleration. The engines were going to be burned out, when all was said and done. The humans accepted serious risks to save innocent lives; I don't know how I didn't see their compassion from the start. The predators intended to stand up for the Mazics, even if on paper, it was too late.

Farsul armor-heavy ships hung back, determining where to insert their presence. The vessels nipped at the heels of any Mazic stragglers, and executed flanking maneuvers with ease. I wondered if these would become the standard Federation model, given the new variables. Humanity's shield-breakers wouldn't be as powerful against armored craft.

Those kinetic railguns better have a lot left in the tank. It'll be like biting on granite, if not.

Mazic assistance calls continued to register on Terran bandwidths. The amount had dipped, which correlated with rapid casualties on sensors. The Federation was on a bombing trajectory, unimpeded; only a few hundred defenders were left. Concern was visible on the faces of many human crew members.

Onso yipped with indignation. "Five vessels of Farsul make, forming a barricade in our path. Should we slow down?"

"No. We should speed up," Tyler growled. "I guarantee, our nerve's a hell of a lot stronger than theirs."

Samantha grinned. "That's not saying much. But I'm all for painting a bullseye on their back."

Converted Tilfish gunships, now decked out in UN insignia, hugged our sides. The allied duo broke with our pace, and threw a little extra into the throttle. The Farsul vessels were waiting to put up an ionic barrier. They must've noticed the magnetic bombs; it didn't make sense to establish fortifications that would be knocked out.

Fortunately, our warship still toted our plasma railgun. The five hostiles waited for the tell-tale energy spike, before raising shields. Between the exorbitant armor and the well-timed barrier, our target shrugged off the blast. I could see a gash in the hull plating, but the enemy could seal off the compartment.

Terran gunships went after the damaged foe, but the other Farsul condensed around their weakest link. Armor tailored to kinetics was the predators' match; these ships were designed to function past shield failures. I wasn't sure how even the humans could thwart these measures. If combat dragged on, it would waste precious time for the Mazic homeworld.

Onso shoved me out of the way. "We have to reach Khoa. I'm going to take a look, since Gojid Sovlin hasn't done anything useful."

My first instinct was to challenge the primitive; this wasn't the time to make a fool of himself. Did the uplift think he could join a predator exchange program, and magically qualify for tactical roles? Fighting wars in the third dimension was a far cry from tilling fields.

Humans, of all species, should understand how behind the times Onso was. I couldn't believe he was anything more than the ship mascot. The only reason I bit my tongue was to avoid provoking Tyler further. It was the officer's job to intervene here, despite any notion of friendship.

However, the Yotul was correct on my inefficacy. Tyler recognizing me weighed on my psyche, and guilt made it difficult to conjure up tactics. Perhaps asking for a transfer couldn't wait for the battle's conclusion. Once the marsupial floundered for a bit, I could hand the station over to Carlos and Sam.

"Do ramming tactics work? We could clip them on the side; velocity and mass are in our favor," Onso said. "Long as we don't strike them head-on, we should remain operational."

Tyler stroked his chin. "Navigations will need to find a perfect

angle. We don't want to knock out any vital functions."

"Well, we don't even have to take these Farsul out. They're stationary, they won't catch us if we pass them. Just need to shove the bastards aside."

The sensors officer relayed the findings to Monahan, who brought the nav station into the loop. Our warship drifted toward a Farsul ship's flank; the course adjustment was incremental. The Terran gunships took the lead, distracting our opponents with kinetics. It hadn't taken humans long to discover how atrocious prey were at multitasking.

Our tail was angled away from the target; that was an attempt to keep the engine secure. Despite my skepticism on an uplift's capabilities, Onso was quick-thinking. I wondered if he had predator disease, with such a knack for violence. It was one thing with human hunters…but genuine herbivores weren't meant for aggression.

Are Yotul doctors even trained in signs of predator disease? Do they screen for it in children at all?

Carlos tugged me into a seat, as our collision was imminent. The male guard looked nervous, listening to crash alarms on the PA. In contrast, Samantha's eyes smoldered with venom; she showed little concern for her welfare. That predator was a kindred spirit in many ways, having lost enough to seek vengeance at any cost.

Our spacecraft broadsided the enemy, hurling it out of our path. The impact sent a jolt through our frame, and my head whipped forward. A harness sucked me back into my seat; I hadn't even noticed Carlos fasten it. Several predators seemed disoriented by the crash, but navigations managed to retain control.

Onso howled with delight. "You guys are insane! I can't believe that worked!"

"If you can't believe it worked, then why the fuck did you suggest it?" I groaned.

Tyler glared at me, eyes stony. "You did great, Onso. If I didn't need you on the viewport, I'd stick you in that spiky bastard's place now."

Not wishing to respond, my gaze shifted out the viewport. The Farsul craft was torn asunder, with its armor caved in from the

wreck. The engine had given out as well, leaving it immobile. Momentum flung the enemy well out of position, and likely incapacitated the occupants. I couldn't imagine inertial dampeners kept up with that drastic shift.

The humans didn't stop to admire their handiwork, with Khoa within reach. There were no conflicts in the nearby vicinity. Mazic friendlies had vanished from the sensor data, after their final stand. Our comms station had gone quiet long ago, aside from the occasional status request from the surface. I didn't want to guess at the casualty count.

Captain Monahan was expressionless, presiding over the bridge. How could she retain such stoicism, knowing the imminent tragedy ahead? Humanity had raced to the Mazics' defense, and wrought havoc on the Federation assailants. Our victory was convincing and swift, enough so to rout the ambush fleet from shock.

Hostiles reached orbital position all the same, and left the predators with no good options. I could see the Kolshians hovering above the green orb, poised to drop their payloads. This homeworld had been stripped of its defenses, and the army was in shambles. We could kill every last enemy, but I didn't see a way to stop bombs from striking the planet.

"Predator fleet, come in." The voice crackling over the radio was unmistakably Kolshian. "Change your vector now, or we will drop antimatter weapons on the planet. This is your only warning."

Murmurs rippled across the bridge, but Monahan raised a hand for silence. UN Command's orders to take up a holding pattern were immediate; human empathy wouldn't permit them to sacrifice civilians. Was allowing the Federation to subdue the Mazics a good alternative though? It would turn a valuable ally into a puppet state.

The United Nations agreed upon our captain's name, when she offered to handle communications. Our battle-tested ship, unfortunately, carried seniority within the hodgepodge Terran fleet. The humans' original constructions were gutted during the Krakotl invasion; surviving craft were few and far between. Qualified officers were in limited supply as well.

Our captain's position was unenviable, in my view. I wasn't sure what room there was to negotiate with those tentacled liars, or

what an acceptable outcome was. More baffling was that the Kolshians spoke to the human military at all. It was a blessing the predators didn't request my input.

Monahan pressed a microphone to her lips. "Federation attackers, we've halted our advance. We'd like to talk. Let's find a resolution that doesn't involve innocent bloodshed, alright?"

The captain signaled to the comms station, and the technicians extended a hail. All we could do was wait for the Kolshians' response; predatory might wouldn't save the day here. A single bomb hitting a Mazic metropolis would kill millions, which forced us to the bargaining table.

It was time to see how crafty humans were in endeavors beyond fighting.

Chapter 76

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: November 28, 2136

The human fleet maintained their positions, while the Mazic homeworld sat in a precarious spot. Our hail was still transmitting, though the enemy hadn't picked up. An evacuation transport soared out of the atmosphere, scrambling civilians to safety. The Kolshians nailed the spacecraft with plasma, and aimed it just right to take it out of commission. It seemed that they weren't trying to decimate it, after all.

Captain Monahan's nostrils flared with agitation. "Federation coalition, you fire on civilian targets again, and our ceasefire is over. We will *not* tolerate such actions."

A violet Kolshian blinked onto a holoscreen. "You're not going to sacrifice the Mazics, for victory and glory? Are you actually clever enough not to show your heartless side?"

"I question who the heartless ones are, when you're the ones threatening a civilian populace. I couldn't care less about victory; we're here to save lives. That's what humans stand for."

The enemy commander paced back and forth, unfazed by the visual of a predator. His crew was a homogenous blend of Kolshians, rather than including aliens. The emerald surface of Khoa was visible in their viewport, along with three target locks on the sensor readout. If I didn't know better, I would think the Commonwealth officer didn't know what to do.

He waved a tentacle. "Damn it. We never wanted to kill them; we wanted to kill you. This fight wasn't supposed to happen like this."

"Tell me something I haven't heard before," Samantha grumbled beside me.

Tyler glowered at her. "Silence!"

Luckily, my guard's quip wasn't picked up on the call; one wrong word could end in catastrophe for the civilians. I was relieved to hear the Kolshians didn't want to initiate the bombing. At least there was some morality among their ranks, however low the bar

was. The Terran captain took the incendiary statement in stride, and curved her lips down.

“Well, why don’t you fight us then? What is it that you want?” Monahan demanded.

The Kolshian’s eyes bulged. “We want you to stop gaining power, predators. Nikonus is right; you show no restraint in your wars. Your aggression is the Krakotl’s, a hundredfold.”

“And your solution to this perception is untampered aggression of your own? I guarantee, if you bomb Khoa, you’re going to give more species reasons to leave the Federation. You can’t undo millions of deaths. That blood will be on your conscience forever.”

“Then back off. You won’t; you’re too proud.”

“I can’t do that. Especially given your history of changing species, irreversibly.”

“So which city should I bomb first, predator? I hear Tlinio has a high industrial capacity…shame it’s a bustling civilian hub too.”

The predator captain had her hands behind her back, but I could see her nails digging into her palm. That indignation was something I shared, hearing such callous threats against the planet. It reminded me of the Arxur’s disregard for civilians; the Kolshians might’ve studied hunters a bit too much. Bartering with lives was dishonorable.

Monahan bared her teeth, and slanted her eyebrows. “That’s your prerogative. But when humanity reaches Aafa—and we will, we’ll glass one Kolshian city for every bomb you drop here. Blood for blood. Should we start with the School of the Flora, or do you have a substitute in mind?”

“You—”

“Shut up. If you surrender now, we’ll treat your lot under our rules of warfare; as prisoners with fair treatment. Trust me, because of those unrestrained wars you saw, you want us to apply the Geneva Conventions. It’s going to be a bad day for you if we decide those are no longer applicable.”

I recalled my lawyer’s explanation, regarding the UN’s prohibition of torture. I was curious what other crimes and devices the Earthlings banished in those agreements. It was a safe bet that

contraptions humans thought too depraved for use, were beyond the realms of our nightmares. All predators were prone to unfathomable cruelty; that was why I'd been able to torture Marcel with such viciousness.

Humans are capable of everything the Arxur have done. They choose not to…but nobody wants to see them go fully unhinged.

Fear flashed in the Kolshian commander's golden eyes. The intensity in Monahan's hungry gaze brought extra weight to her threat; it was like staring into the countenance of death. That unyielding scowl was an assertion of dominance, whether done consciously or not. I found it difficult to shrug off her animosity, though it wasn't directed at me.

"I'd r-rather die than see any of my men surrender to you. As for Aafa, you wouldn't flaunt your cruelty while masquerading for the prey," the Kolshian hissed.

Monahan bobbed her shoulders. "You're confused. Either we're aggressive predators that can't control ourselves, or we do show restraint. Pick one."

"I…you're twisting my words! Alien freak."

"I have no time for petty insults. What is an acceptable way to get you far, far away from this system? That's what we all want."

The Commonwealth officer sported a stricken expression. Hatred sparkled in his eyes, and he stole a glance back at his bridge crew. No captain wanted to watch their subordinates die. I always felt responsible when my plans went awry, and casualties ensued; decisions traced back to the commander.

The Kolshian saw in the underlings' faces, how much they longed to escape from the predators. The prospect of being hunted by humans terrified them; Terrans were too methodical to outwit. The Arxur could get sloppy due to their food aspirations, but the primates treated war like a mathematical equation. They sought the simplest solution to render the enemy dead.

"Let 1500 of our ships leave, and don't attempt to pursue them. A few hundred of us will stay behind," the enemy leader decided. "You so much as scan us, I *will* order Khoa bombed with the remainder."

Monahan straightened. "A smart decision. You don't want to lose so

many ships, with all the souls aboard. The UN will allow you to flee; that's acceptable to my parameters."

Onso scoured the viewport, as ship activity picked up around the planet. The Terran fleet opened avenues for enemy departures, and made no efforts to engage them. The more hostiles we cleared out of the area, the lower the maximum casualties were. This was a step in the right direction, as far as I was concerned.

The Yotul shook his head. "Should I prepare for pursuit? We can't just let those bastards leave."

"I'll wait for the captain's orders, but I imagine we'll honor our word. It sets a good precedent, to be able to negotiate," Tyler answered.

Carlos shot a glance at Sam. "I know what you're thinking, but it would be nice to have options on the table. Maybe they'll even start letting us surrender, giving us sapient rights."

The female human snorted. "Dream on. They like us better dead."

"Sometimes, I think the Federation likes us better dead too. But the truth is, they don't care about us at all," Onso spat. "Did you know they offered to destroy our railroads and steamboats?"

My eyes narrowed, at the uplift's distortion of events. The Federation weren't my favorite faction anymore, but clearing out obsolete technology was helpful. I didn't understand why the humans were giving him sympathetic looks. Disgust crossed Tyler's expression, and Carlos wrinkled his nose as well.

I chewed at my claws. "Well, you don't need them anymore. You're stuck in the past, Onso. No reason to keep relics around."

Onso curled his lip. "That's what they said! They called it a celebration, as they demolished our shipyards. Maybe we still like the things *we* built."

"But the Federation's tech is better. Is this about pride?"

"Pride is not seeking your own identity. Fuck you!"

Carlos swatted my neck. "Erasing someone's culture and beliefs is a form of genocide. I'd think you of all people would understand that, Sovlin."

Tyler glared at me, before storming off to comfort Onso. The mention of my name was enough to make his blood boil; the wedge

between us hadn't been dealt with. My wrongdoing wasn't his fault, and it had never been my intent to disrupt his work. When the current crisis was resolved, I owed the tall human an apology.

The fleeing Kolshians had put some distance between themselves and Khoa, while rushing to escape the FTL-disruptors' range. I imagined they were looking over their shoulder for pursuing predators. None of them eased up on the accelerator, since being the herd's straggler was a death sentence. But the humans resisted the urge to chase; they rarely succumbed to hunter desires.

Terrans can conduct themselves like normal people, despite their deficits. It never ceases to impress me.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Captain Monahan turned her back to the camera, gazing at the stars. "We never had to fight. We could work to make something better."

"Quit it with your lies. Counting colonies, 34 worlds have been wiped out since we met you. And you've been here for four months," the Kolshian muttered.

"We didn't start, or even bomb, any of those. It's not our fault everyone keeps attacking us, and abandoning your defenses."

"You're in kahoots with the Arxur…pulling the strings even. You wouldn't attract them if you weren't rotten to the core. Humans enjoy killing, for all your *empathy*."

"I enjoy stopping bad people from hurting others. Nobody else has to die today. Certainly not innocent hostages, because you hate us. On our honor, we'll let you all leave unharmed."

The Kolshian shifted with discomfort; it was clear he mistrusted the human's proposition. Several of the ships he left behind were making a break for it, without waiting for orders. Flighty captains weren't going to give the predators time to change their mind. It left a sour taste in my mouth, to see the enemy getting away.

"On your honor?" The Kolshian flailed with exasperation. "What good does that do me? Predators deceive."

Monahan snorted. "So do 'prey'…look at you. I haven't lied to you once, nor has the human race. Please, think of the Mazics."

"I…I'm not a murderer. I don't want to kill children…herbivores. Shit, your trick is working. We'll leave."

The video feed switched off before the human could respond. The Kolshian ships glided away from Khoa's vulnerable surface, maintaining their formation. The Terran fleet honored the non-aggression pact, rather than confronting the enemy. The predators were here to save their allies, first and foremost.

The human crew offered a rousing applause for Captain Monahan, which took the aliens by surprise. I was accustomed to the predators' noise level, after living around them for months. Bringing a Terran nearby was a fast way to dismantle peace and quiet.

The poor Fissan on comms bucked in agitation, and the Venlil observers covered their sensitive ears. Onso delighted in the ruckus, however, with his primitive sensibilities. The Yotul began yipping and jumping around, like an animal. Monahan allowed the cacophony for a moment, before shouting orders to pipe down. Silence overtook the bridge in an instant.

The Terran captain sighed. "Let's not pat ourselves on the back yet. This was a good day for us, but I promise, the Mazics won't look back as fondly. Comms, hail Khoa."

The beige mammal on screen answered with immediacy. His eyes were frantic, as though he'd fallen over himself to respond. Upon closer inspection, I recognized the older male as President Cupo. The Mazic leader seemed alarmed to be at the predator fleet's mercy. Their defenses were laid bare, and the poor guy was frazzled from the assault too.

"Greetings," Monahan said politely. "Do you require any aid? We're happy to assist with search and rescue. There's a civilian hauler immobilized in orbit, for starters."

Cupo flared his trunk. "N-no, thank you. We can handle it. What payment can I offer you, humans? We'll give you whatever you want."

"Payment? We don't want anything from you. Humanity came to your aid because we're allies. You're part of our 'pack' now, as I imagine you would put it."

The Mazic was silent for a long time. Something resembling regret flickered in his gaze, though it was gone a second later. The leader composed himself, and turned back to the camera. He appeared isolated, in a vast bunker with only a single aide.

“I never trusted humanity. I wasn’t willing to risk my people to help Earth,” Cupo said. “Even with Cilany’s revelation, I only committed resources to your team because I saw the Federation was a sinking ship. Now, you protected us, and I am…sorry. Please, let us repay your aid.”

The Terran captain chuckled. “All is forgiven, President Cupo. Your choices were relatively tame, compared to the genocidal maniacs in the Federation.”

“Oh human, I stood beside those people for years. It was wonderful, all herbivores working together, in perfect harmony. How did nobody see the truth? I should have.”

“Don’t blame yourself. We all see what we want to see. Just like people read evil into us, and cherry-pick our worst moments. Because that’s what they’re looking for.”

“You’ve had to grovel and scrape for every friend you have, human, but not anymore. The Mazic Presidium will *never* forget your heroism. I’ll set aside my best scientists to support your colonization efforts, and you can have the pick of our abandoned worlds. Unless you mind being so close to us.”

“Not one bit. The United Nations would love to cooperate going forward.”

My ears swiveled away from the dialogue, and I padded away from the sensors station. Pronounced footsteps followed at once, and a shadow fell over my form. Without looking, I knew it was Tyler lurking behind me; he was stalking me with predatory intent. Fear pulsated through my ribcage, and my spines bristled to the point of discomfort.

Swallowing, I ambled into the mess hall and swiveled around. The sensors officer’s chiseled jawline was rigid, suggesting the human wanted to bite me. His teeth were ill-suited for that, but the subconscious tell was there. Those blue eyes glittered like ice, scorching into my vulnerable areas.

I cleared my throat. “Sir, I’m sorry for my initial behavior. I panicked when you said Slanek, and I didn’t want to disrupt—”

A fist rammed into my snout, before I could flinch. Tyler’s punch carried phenomenal power, as his calcified bones connected with my skin. I caressed my bleeding nostrils, and the human snaked an

elbow around my neck. His knee lurched up into my stomach, knocking out the breath.

I doubled over, but the predator's grip kept me from collapsing. Pain overwhelmed my senses, and my conscious mind relished it. Control was slipping away, however, as instinctive panic suppressed my faculties. It took the last of my lucidity to refrain from swiping back.

Tyler tightened his hold on my neck, before hurling me into a cabinet. I slammed against the upholstery, crumpling in a ball. The human marched ahead with effortless strides, and hovered over me. My heart was on the brink of bursting, seeing his malicious snarl.

"This is what it feels like to be physically beaten, and powerless to fight back. You did that to Marcel for a week!" the Terran officer spat.

"I…know…" I coughed out the blood that trickled into my mouth. "I h-hate…myself for it. Only…didn't k-kill myself…so h-humans could have justice."

The predator watched me crawl on the floor, before extending a rough hand. I accepted his paw, allowing him to pull me to my feet. Rather than resuming the slugfest, Tyler helped me to a chair. He retrieved a paper towel from the sink, and pressed it to my nose.

The primate stepped back. "You want to die?"

"Sure, but I'm a c-coward." Tears swelled in my eyes, and rolled down in rivulets. "Turns out I'm terrible at getting myself killed, and…at picking out the monsters who hurt my family. It w-wasn't Marcel, but any predator sufficed."

"Shit man. Did you ever get treatment for PTSD? What you went through was pretty fucked up. You should've never been in a commanding position to begin with."

"T-treatment for what? That didn't translate."

"…I see. You should talk to a therapist; I know a good one. It's what Marcel would want."

Tyler decided our spat was finished, and left me to nurse my wounds. Was mental treatment what Marcel would really want for me? My thoughts harkened back to my cell on Earth, and the red-haired human mocking my inability to cope. I was beginning to

believe that he realized self-contempt was the worst punishment. Didn't he want me to live with this misery, until death's sweet release?

But Tyler knows him personally. If he says Marcel would want to help me…

With Khoa's rescue, I saw that humans stood for the preservation of life. Perhaps that extended to someone like myself, despite my past. It terrified me to explore my predator side; losing my identity had been devastating. How could anyone grapple with their entire life being a lie?

There was one certainty, one absolute truth, in my universe now. It was that humans were the only ones that could stitch this galaxy back together.

Chapter 77

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

Dawn crept over the horizon, bringing light to Sillis' supercontinent. Human forces milled near a water tower, which marked the border of a small settlement. Tilfish extermination officers were holding the populace hostage, and that eliminated the option of bombing this region. Our current plan was to flush the resistance out.

My heart pounded, as I rode with Marcel to the rendezvous point. The redhead had warned me that military canines were part of this operation. Fear of non-sapient predators seemed impossible to get over, but I was determined to try. Tyler had texted me videos of his dog, after the battle of Earth; it was clear the two species shared a bond.

If the awful beasts are important to humans, I have to try. Being a ghastly predator doesn't inherently make an animal bad.

Marcel hopped out of our truck, and I bounded after him. The oxygen-rich environment helped numb my fear, which was a blessing. The dog was sitting among the UN pack, panting with its slobbery tongue. Its soulless eyes pinpointed me, and its ears perked up malevolently. That wasn't even addressing the rotund fangs!

"Are you alright, Slanek? You look like you're about to faint," the vegetarian growled.

My tail drooped between my legs. "J-just…peachy."

"He's friendly, bud. These are the most domesticated animals on Earth. Hell, they were known as 'man's best friend'…before we met Venlil, of course."

At this point, I knew the Terrans originally recruited dogs to track down prey. The non-sapients had a sublime sense of smell, but that also meant this mutt could detect my terror. Still, this introduction was something that had to be done. Marcel *had* to see that I accepted his hunting ancestry. Maybe it would put my predator phobia to bed for good.

I offered a silent plea to the universe, that I wouldn't get swallowed whole. My paws carried me closer, and I focused on one step at a

time. Every impulse pleaded to run, but I centered my thoughts around Marcel. This time, Slanek was *not* going to be a liability. If the animal went wild, the humans would protect me; it was their pet, after all.

The hideous creature eyeballed me upon approach, and I extended a shaking paw. The monster sniffed, nostrils quivering with hunger. It opened its mouth again, and its tongue snaked toward me. Slobber coagulated on my arm fur, causing me to recoil. Its human handlers offered words of encouragement.

Marcel grinned. “See, he likes you! Want to pet him?”

I gulped, not wanting to let my human down. The terror had taken the form of a migraine; the pain was a wedge expanding beneath my eyes. The dog scrutinized me, a menacing glint in its pupils. It was sizing me up, waiting to catch me off-guard. My training taught me to ground myself, and focus on controlling my breathing.

I reached to touch its skull, and felt its coarse pelt against my paw pads. The vile predator released a guttural grunt, which reverberated in its chest. The malicious bark made me spring back, and collide with Marcel. Was the sable demon going to eat me? It must have decided I was prey!

The mongrel stood quickly, wagging its tail. It nosed around in the dirt, before grabbing a stick in its jaw. It pranced over to me, and dropped the twig at my feet. Globs of saliva foamed on the bark, which suggested it had worked up an appetite. The creature emitted a high-pitched whine, as I stared dumbfounded.

Marcel stooped over, and passed the stick to me. “Throw it. Tell Dino to fetch!”

“D-dino?” I questioned.

“That’s his name. C’mon, let the pupper have some fun!”

I made a mental note to inquire about the name’s origin later. My throw was pitiful, landing just a few feet from where we stood. Dino scampered after it, and snapped the twig off the ground. Relief flooded my chest, as I realized this was play-hunting. The game was predatory, but it meant the dog wasn’t hunting me.

However, it was a little bone-chilling, to consider why dogs would retrieve objects for humans. In the ancient days, this would’ve been a dead carcass dropped at its owner’s feet. Was it tagging along

with the soldiers to hunt the Tilfish? Would it chase them down, and report back to the Terrans with the catch? All as the primates lavished it with “Good boy” praises…

“That was awesome, Slanek!” Marcel clapped me on the back. “You’d create quite the stir on our internet, if they saw this.”

“Huh. I g-guess predators…don’t eat everything in sight.”

“Do you chow down on every leaf you see? Anyhow, I want to hear you say that you’re good to come with us.”

“Where you go, I go. D-don’t worry.”

The blinders kept the dog out of my vision, as we clambered into a transport. Many humans were grinning at me, and I did my best imitation of a smile. The sight cracked the soldiers up; it was nice to lift their mood, even at my expense. Terrans didn’t snarl as much as they used to, ever since a tenth of their population was lost. No amount of Venlil ‘cuteness’ would change that reality.

Dino plopped itself beside my paws, resting its thick skull on the floor. The beast appeared tranquil, but its ears were pricked up and alert. I didn’t like its chosen proximity to me, and I found myself praying that Marcel would intervene. The vegetarian merely tousled the dog’s ears, the way he did with me. Active combat was preferable to this situation; at least I was equipped to handle that peril.

Our vehicle procession didn’t get far, since the Tilfish holdouts had anticipated UN intervention. Spikes were laid across the main road, and fallen trees had been hauled over the path as well. Side routes were jammed with barricades as well. Humans couldn’t drag those away without heavy machinery; it would take an eternity to await equipment.

It might’ve been possible to drive off-road, but footpaths had been coated in gasoline. A Tilfish could set the route ablaze, the second the UN made a move. Any open land had been accounted for as well; parks and green spaces had been flooded by local aqueducts. Even if Terran trucks could wade through the water, the muddy earth risked trapping their tires.

Marcel nudged me out of the vehicle. “Stay alert, Slanek. The exterminators left one route into the city; foot traffic across the roads.”

“There’s a trap waiting for sure. You won’t have the element of surprise,” I said.

“Thankfully, we have recon drones to scout ahead. We’re not going in dark. The dog is great at picking up explosives, too.”

Dino placed its nose on the road, sprinting ahead of the humans. I hoped the dog was running off for good. If it became a wild predator, terrorizing the local populace, maybe the Terrans would stop bringing their kind on missions. No predator soldiers made an effort to stop its departure, which suggested the mutt was more trouble than it was worth.

The UN infantry readied their weapons, and surveyed the area with alertness. I mimicked their movements, though the dwellings nearby seemed vacated. Thermal feeds were relayed to their holopads, granting us their drones’ vision. Tilfish were scattered throughout the town square, with many taking refuge in the extermination office. Judging by their location, I assumed those were hostiles.

Enemy patrols also wandered the streets, policing the citizenry. The populace was small enough to monitor, and residents had been confined to their homes. That made it easier to differentiate between combatants and hostages; it was best if the innocents remained inside. Hunting down every last hostile would be a challenge regardless, since their forces were spread out across the landscape.

I trundled ahead, jogging to match the humans’ pace. We weaved around the obstacles placed in our path, and climbed over a few lengthier objects. The persistence predators were tireless as they moved, but my body ached from the strenuous activity. I noticed Marcel favoring the leg he’d been shot in, so I decided not to ask for a ride.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Marcel gritted his teeth. “My conditioning’s not…peak, after being injured for months. Recovering from Sovlin’s fun room was hard enough. Gotta get my fitness back up…rebuild strength in this leg.”

“That makes sense. We lose strength if we’re sedentary too. Our scientists think that Venlil physical activity has declined alongside the native predator population. Fitness isn’t as important without

threats."

"That's probably right. Likewise, a predator's…our fitness correlates to our participation in hunting. Which we don't do anymore."

A resounding bark jolted us out of the conversation. Dino sat beside a crate of black powder, which bore the insignia of mining companies. A fuse was attached, but the device hadn't been triggered yet. The Tilfish must be waiting for humans to pass by. It was the extermination officers' humor, to weaponize a predator's tactics against them.

The dog's handler whistled, and it came running back with eagerness. I guess the mutt wasn't keen on escaping after all; the primates had it under their spell. Come to think of it, even a feral predator wouldn't run away from an easy source of flesh. Terrans must keep control with generous helpings of food.

It's playing along, because it's learned that humans reward it handsomely. But the second they run out of food, it'll eat them alive.

Whatever my thoughts on Dino's motives, it was impressive that humans trained a beast to detect weaponry. Its scouting potential was valuable to our foray, and its sensory abilities made the journey safer. Powder explosives were primitive compared to the Terran arsenal, but I still didn't want to stroll past one.

Once our troops were clear of the blast, a UN soldier flung a match at the canister. It erupted with a puff of smoke, churning up the nearby dirt. Marcel waved a hand, and the combat-ready primates pressed on. There had to be Tilfish enemies in close proximity, if they planned to trigger a blast. Terran drones circled back to our position, searching for hiding hostiles.

Marcel whistled. "Come out unarmed; this is over! We see you. Yes, you right there."

Our surveillance had yet to locate any Tilfish, but the bluff fooled the unseen assailants. A trio of insects scuttled out of a burrow, and opened gunfire. I snapped my firearm in their direction, focusing on lining up the sights. After a split-second of concentration, I depressed the trigger.

My bullet pierced through an insect's skull, ejecting brain matter from the wound. The humans reacted swiftly as well, unleashing a string of kinetics. The enemy hit two of our men before we shot

back, but wandering out into the open spelled their demise. Predators didn't miss a clear, unobstructed target, and this scuffle was no exception to that rule.

I drew a shuddering breath. "T-that was my first kill."

Sympathy flashed in Marcel's hazel eyes. "The first time is the hardest. If it's any consolation, we've all been there…I still remember mine."

"But you're human."

"Doesn't matter. Unless you're a sociopath, taking a life is something you wrestle with. You feel like you've changed…and you have changed, Slanek. Just remember what you're fighting for."

The Terran brigade marched toward the town square. I was certain the extermination office was our first target, so this was no time to get emotional. My participation was for my friend's sake; the why was something I had no qualms over. Every bit of training was so that I could be effective, and prove to the galaxy that Venlil weren't a laughingstock.

Finding the route to the exterminators' workplace was easy; all we had to do was follow the trail of posters. Several predators stopped to scan visual translators near bulletins. The human likeness, often an unflattering caricature, was visible on many of them. It was obvious the predator-killing guild took particular offense to their presence.

Marcel inspected one, shaking his head as he read the translation. The caption asked, *Do these look like arboreal eyes to you?* A human was clutching silverware, as they stared at a Krakotl on a plate. It looked accurate to Earth cutlery, which was a nice touch. The artist's rendition had their mane sticking up in all directions, exaggerated fangs curving out of closed lips, and veins popping in dilated eyes.

I ambled further ahead, and tapped a different poster. It depicted Gojids in a pen, cowering away from a human hand. Earth's silhouette was superimposed in the background, with a foreboding red glow encircling the planet. The tagline read, *Asylum for all.* The refugees themselves could confirm the conditions weren't nefarious; cattle ships belonged only to the Arxur.

The one posted by the entrance at least had a basis in reality. It

depicted an actual photograph of human soldiers dropping from the sky, as Gojid stampede victims littered the ground. *Coming to a city near YOU,* the propaganda proclaimed. The subtext listed an exterminator recruiting URL, specifically for volunteers to resist a UN invasion.

“I don’t think they like us, Slanek,” Marcel growled. “No clue where I got that impression from, though.”

I took cover, waiting for humans to breach the door. “You have an uncanny resemblance to the one munching on the Krakotl. Is that your long-lost twin?”

“Funny, I was thinking it looked more like your mother.”

“Hey…we’re going to settle this after the battle!”

My predator snarled, revealing his pearly fangs. The UN soldiers exchanged hand signals by the entrance, before setting a breach charge. The blast rocked the door off its hinges, and the humans stalked into the building. There were a few rifle bursts, as the Terrans picked off the Tilfish in the entryway.

I shouldered my own gun, and slunk into the lobby. Smoke clouded the air, wisps visible in the dimly-lit environment. The predators were inspecting a layout of the building; their first step was to seal off exits. We knew where the bulk of the enemies were located, thanks to the drones. It was a matter of our success clearing them out.

The humans were closing in on the rogue exterminators, and I pitied the fools who dared to fight back.

Chapter 78

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

The extermination office featured a modest array of cubicles, past the lobby. There were more employment opportunities than hunting predators. Call centers had to be operational around the clock, and another set of pencil-pushers checked web reports. Other workers researched infestations, identifying potential culprits and their method of survival. These briefings prepared the officers for a job's challenges.

The humans peered around the entrance, before a brave few slid into a cubicle. No gunfire was unleashed at our appearance, so the rest of us took positions. Marcel produced a pocket-sized drone, and the device silently soared into the air. It glided over rows of cubicles, searching for any heat signatures.

The miniature robot stopped near a window, and zoomed in on two Tilfish. The predators crept forward, with the same silence their ancestors used to hunt creatures twice their size. Dino mimicked their focus, as its handler whispered something to it. The dog seated itself, and I took my opportunity to distance myself. The gun felt light as a feather in my grip; it stayed pointed right at the hiding spot.

Marcel poked his gun over the cubicle wall, and his comrades also shoved scopes at the Tilfish. Their mandibles clicked with terror, surprised by the primates' stealth. They bent their heads in a gesture of submission. Large predators shouldn't be able to approach without audible cues, yet humans could suppress their footsteps so well.

"Please don't shoot us!" an insectoid clicked. "We're just IT workers…we surrender!"

Marcel jerked his gun skyward. "Stand up. Walk toward the window."

The Tilfish scuttled back, though their compound eyes lingered on the predators. My human shouted demands to turn around, but the enemy hesitated to comply. Something was odd about their posture, and I couldn't chalk it up to fear. Their appendages seemed folded

to conceal an object.

Marcel approached to search the workers; his hazel eyes were narrowed to slits. The Tilfish's thoraxes twitched, poised to strike out. Without any consideration, I lunged at one of them. The insect I tackled bucked under my grip, and kicked its cohort in the process. I clung on for dear life, reaching for whatever was in its clutches.

The humans noticed the downed one was wielding a gun; that "IT worker" was scrambling to right himself. Multiple bullets incised the hostile's exoskeleton, before he could enact his plans. Marcel pointed his firearm at the one I was riding, but he couldn't get a clean shot. The Tilfish had latched on to my forepaw, which prevented me from dismounting.

I screeched, as the Tilfish slammed me against the wall. Adrenaline surged through my veins like a drug. My free arm shot toward his lens-like eyes, and I sank tiny claws into the smooth flesh. He howled in pain, loosening his grip on my other paw. My body crashed to the floor with a thud, knocking the wind from my lungs.

The predators pumped the Tilfish full of lead, before he could try anything else. Some blood splattered onto my fur, painting yellow splotches across my chest. Every muscle in my body quivered, as horror washed over me. I crawled back toward the humans, and struggled to my feet. Several primates helped wipe the blood off, checking me for injuries.

"Slanek, for the love of God, why did you not *shoot* those Tilfish?" Marcel grunted.

I straightened my head fur. "W-well. I saw them reaching for a weapon."

"I understand that. My question stands."

"I…don't know. L-let's get moving."

Terran soldiers swept the room, verifying that other Tilfish hadn't stowed away. We progressed to an interior stairwell, which led to the upper floor. The armory was tucked by the landing, but it had been emptied of guns and flamethrowers. The exterminators found a use for every weapon in their possession.

I hugged the wall alongside Marcel, using his presence to ground me. Every instinct suggested to hyperventilate, and dwell on the

bloodshed I'd kickstarted. But giving into those thoughts wouldn't facilitate my survival; it would hinder the UN's mission too. These Tilfish needed to die, because they were a threat to Earth. There was nothing else to consider.

These rebels were the strongest advocates for joining that genocidal raid, I imagine. They're responsible for billions dead.

The predators were hesitant to climb the stairwell. There had been dozens of life signatures in this building, so the bulk were waiting on the top floor. Per the tactics UN training drilled into me, this was a chokepoint. It was advantageous to defenders, and forced assailants to cover multiple angles. Grenades weren't a viable option, with their tendency to roll back on us.

"Is there another way up?" I whispered.

Marcel shrugged. "We could just blow this place to kingdom come, but the brass doesn't want collateral. There's no telling if there's hostages 'til we sweep the premises."

"I'm surprised you didn't suggest dropping out of the sky. That is the human way, as I recall."

"Intel suggests this faction has surface-to-air capabilities. Attaining a ladder is possible, but the roof is likely booby-trapped anyways. These fellas seem to want us to come to them."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They're basically a cult, and they're cornered. They could be planning to take us down with them."

My human turned his gun skyward, and inched back-first toward the stairs. He popped off several shots from a sharp angle, which connected with one Tilfish. Judging by the alarmed chatter, there were six or seven defenders perched above us. The insects leaned over the railing, and rained fire on the redhead.

Tension crossed Marcel's scarred face, as he ducked back under the alcove. The humans waited for the enemy to deplete ammunition, knowing they weren't conservative in its usage. My friend peeked back out, and was joined by a pair of comrades. The trio offered suppressive fire, as the Terran troops hustled up the stairs.

I swallowed my nerves, which reminded me what an easy target I was. If these humans could bear the risk, so could I; this was about

trusting their plan. My feet sprinted up two stairs at a time, and I joined our squad mid-way up. We had a better line of sight from this angle, which allowed us to bombard the Tilfish.

One human dropped beside me, and another released a strained yelp. This charge was a strategical blunder, but it was the lesser evil of our options. We were hoping to scale the incline as quickly as possible. Though I was too frazzled to aim, I got off several blind shots. Whether or not my bullets contributed, the exterminators were gunned down in seconds.

Panting heavily, I labored up the rest of the stairs. The predators tended to our wounded, lugging both to the top. One's binocular eyes were glassy, suggesting they were already gone. My eyes shot back to Marcel, who was the first to engage the Tilfish. Relief clamped at my heart, when I saw him hobbling up behind me. His brazenness could've gotten him killed!

Marcel tested the door. "Easy now. We're going to sustain losses, Slanek. We can't let that distract us…we all know the risks."

"I didn't say anything?" I squeaked.

"You didn't have to. You wear your emotions all over your face."

I rubbed my temples, trying to fight off a nagging headache. Dino bounded up the stairs, and began sniffing at my legs. The dog's presence was the last straw, in a situation that was stressful already. Why couldn't the damn beast leave me alone? Wasn't it enough that I was in imminent danger from bullets?

The humans departed the stairwell onto the second floor, and a slew of gunfire welcomed them. I bolted away from Dino; getting shot was preferrable to his creepy drooling. This appeared to be some sort of break room, with lounge stools, tables, and a mini-kitchen in the area. The Tilfish had condensed the lounge chairs into fortifications, and upturned tables for cover too.

Our position was a barren bottleneck, which was by design. Glass shattered to my left, as the window was nailed by errant bullets. Shards glinted on the floor, and reflected the sunlight pouring in. I suddenly wished I had goofy paw coverings, like the humans. My feet weren't fleshy like theirs, but pads wouldn't stop me from impaling myself.

Guess the only place to hide is by the cabinets to my right. Already lots

of humans cramming in there though; need somewhere less crowded.

Keeping as far away from the broken window as possible, I scampered across to the opposite end of the room. Bullets whizzed past my head, and took out several humans who tailed me. A handful of us reached the other side, where an arch opened up into a parallel corridor. Further down, there were a set of doors marked with a "Biohazard" symbol. I assumed that was where prey remains, and predator experimentation were housed.

Bootsteps closed in on my position, rough and unsteady. Marcel dived through the archway, flashing his teeth at me. He huddled against the wall, and predator chemicals caused his eyes to dilate. The vegetarian sucked in several breaths, while Tilfish gunfire peppered the plaster around us. I risked a brief glance at my paw pads, which seemed clear of glass.

UN soldiers retreated to the stairwell, as bullets decimated their position. My side advance was secure against a support wall, for now, but the firefight had ground to an impasse. The Tilfish exterminators needed to be flushed from their shelter, before we incurred more losses.

I propped my gun up against my chest. "Those bastards think they can hunker down. What about grenades now?"

"I thought you'd never ask," the Terran chuckled.

Several soldiers readied grenades, calculating the perfect moment to strike. Human predation was methodical, a far cry from mindless chasing. Their discipline kept their units functioning as well-oiled machines. If I was opposing them, efficiency would be more frightening than an animalistic frenzy. Terrans were much less likely to make mistakes than the Arxur.

I was grateful to be on their team. If first contact had gone differently, the Venlil would have been the first ones fighting them. We would've never had the exchange program, which meant I'd still see humans as monsters. What fate would befall Earth, had Sovlin gotten his mitts on the *Odyssey* astronauts? My friend would be dead too, and…I might've helped kill him.

I shook my head, not wanting to think about dreadful causalities. The predators clattered explosives across the floor, which arrived at the Tilfish fortifications. Marcel wouldn't let me carry grenades,

since my throwing ability was negligible. Human arm torsion was effortless, in contrast; hunting with spears forced their ancestors to evolve precision.

Enemy screams followed the grenades, as the detonations tore any shelter apart. This time, I understood that humans would capitalize on the chaos. My legs propelled me back into the room, forsaking the corridor's refuge. A few Tilfish retained their guns, but most hostiles languished on the floor. Buttery blood washed across the tile, with spatter reaching up onto the walls.

The Terrans strode up to the barricades; Dino darted into the heart of the action as well. The dog subdued any Tilfish who were rising, while the humans' picked off writhing targets. UN soldiers admired the heap of bug corpses, poking a few to ensure they were dead. Our ranks sustained some damage in the fray, but we got the better end of the bargain.

Marcel shuffled into the corridor. "So, that door we saw. I've learned the Federation warning symbols, and the last thing we need is them springing some 'cure' on us. Are they testing bioweapons here?"

"Highly unlikely. Consider where we are. It's marked biohazard because of predator contamination. You *are* predator contamination, lots of it, so I doubt you care."

"You never know, Slanek. Contact with some animal's saliva might turn me into a superpredator, with claws and horns."

"I'd be more worried about that with Dino than you. You ready to end this?"

The redhead nodded. I mulled over how their teasing behavior had rubbed off on me; sarcasm had never featured in my lexicon so regularly. It did seem like a healthy way of expressing stress, especially in extreme situations. Bantering with my predator distracted me from the nauseating fear.

Upon closer inspection, the biohazard door was left ajar. Marcel nudged it with his foot, eliciting a mournful creak. The human made gagging noises, and tugged his shirt over his nose. I wasn't sure what his reaction pertained to, given my lack of smell. Was the air laced with some poison?

"Bleh! That acrid smell…" Marcel coughed.

My gaze darted to the floor, and the source of his discomfort revealed itself. A thin coating of brownish liquid amassed, like a wading pool. The gasoline was discernible upon entry, even with blinders on. Did the exterminators think humans would trample through a blaze zone? Most sapients avoided burning alive where possible.

I swished my tail with disgust. “Petrol. There must be a few Tilfish camped inside, waiting to set it off.”

“I don’t have time for this. Playing timberwood’s not on my agenda.” The human’s teeth protruded with malevolence, as he acquired a match. “How about a little role reversal? Surprise, fuckers!”

After lighting the object in his hand, Marcel dropped the spark into the gasoline rim. Orange fire snaked across the liquid, and leapt onto any secondary fuel: walls, furniture, and Tilfish alike. My human turned his back on the inferno, and strolled back to the stairwell. While the exterminators achieved their self-immolation plan, we needed to double-time it out of here.

The UN troops jogged past the break room’s body trail, and skipped down the stairwell. Their longer legs allowed them to retrace their steps quickly. I lagged behind them a bit, but my friend circled back for me. Marcel scooped me up in strong arms, ignoring his own exhaustion. The human was a good herdmate; he always looked out for my welfare.

I know he’d never leave me behind, come stampede or high water.

It was a quick journey, cuddling against his muscular form. We hustled past the cubicles and the lobby, before bursting into fresh air. The blaze had gained intensity, as it battered the upper windows. I spotted Tilfish silhouettes thrashing about, enveloped by smoke and debris. Perhaps it was unwise that the professionals made their workshop flammable by design.

“Guard each exit,” Marcel barked. “Those exterminators’ll either burn alive, or they’ll try to evacuate. Unless they come out surrendering, shoot any you see.”

Dino’s quadrupedal form was visible among our ranks. The dog strayed from its handler, and opted to harass me again. In a rare moment of bravery, I shoved its snout away. It offered a pitiful

whine, before curling up at my feet nonetheless. Its brown eyes never left me, as it thumped its tail a single time.

Why wouldn't it leave me alone? It was for Marcel's sake that I didn't chase it off with my gun. I hated that mutt, just as much as the humans adored it. Once we cleared the neighborhoods of rogue patrols, this mission would be complete. I couldn't wait to achieve victory, so I could get myself far away from the feral predator.

Chapter 79

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

Venlil resources were spread thin, with millions of rescues taxing our resources. Volunteers worked to exhaustion, and human refugees chipped in as much as anyone. The predators' assistance was appreciated, but we had to monitor their interactions with the former cattle. I was certain they didn't mean any harm. However, the primates often didn't realize how terrifying their basic mannerisms could be.

All it took was one Terran reacting with aggression, or lifting their mask at the wrong time. If their secret got out within this facility, I could imagine how the rescues would take the news. Would a former exterminator like Glim accept that our closest ally was a predator race? Could Haysi grasp the Federation's misdeeds, after studying our idyllic relations in history?

Hey, just so you know, one of every ten races are flesh-eaters, I imagined myself saying. *Oh, and our neighbors are predators; we're allied in their war against the Federation. With the Arxur too.*

This was a delicate situation, regardless of outside intervention. A large chunk of these Venlil were raised in captivity, and lacked any understanding of our modern society. Their language and higher thinking functions were rudimentary at best. The Arxur hadn't exposed them to other aliens, or offered any welfare services.

"Governor? It's your move," Sara said.

Haysi was laying on her stomach, inspecting the "Jenga" tower. The former historian had come out of her shell; it was good to see her taking an interest in the Terrans' culture. Noah and Sara kept their answers vague, which failed to sate her curiosity. The humans brought this block game with them today, and used it as an introduction to their recreation.

My claw tapped a loose piece near the center, and I coaxed it out of its spot. The tower quivered a bit, which sparked my nerves. The Venlil rescues leaned in with interest, alertness in their eyes. Satisfied that the structure would hold, I set the plank atop it.

Noah rubbed his hands together. “Wonderfully done. My turn!”

“Dear stars!” Glim flinched back, and shot the human a wary glance. “H-how did your voice go that deep, Noah?”

“Uh, I have a bit of a cough,” the ambassador muttered, clearing his throat. “Making it very throaty; I apologize.”

Noah avoided turning toward Glim, which would indicate binocular vision. The predator’s emotions were invisible under his mask, but the Venlil exterminator’s confusion was apparent. Male humans’ speech had a growling texture, which added weight to their voices. This was in stark contrast to our squeaky pitch.

The UN ambassador jabbed his hand forward with no tact, and yanked a piece from the bottom. The Jenga tower toppled over, crashing to the floor. I suspected Noah had lost the game on purpose, to distract Glim. The astronaut excused himself, and sped out of the room. He realized how close he was to blowing his cover.

Glim tilted his head. “You Gaians are a strange species, Sara. Noah did not seem sick to me, this entire time.”

“Ah, Noah tries to play tough. I bet he’s doctored himself up on cough syrup,” the Terran scientist responded.

“Something about you bothers me. It might just be that I can’t read you. If you aren’t comfortable taking your masks off, I’d like to at least see an anatomical diagram of your species.”

“I’ll look into acquiring that for you.”

“Will you?”

“That tone. What are you implying, Glim?”

The male Venlil pinned his ears back, and swished his tail with irritation. I feared that he’d already guessed the “Gaians” were predators. However, the fact that he was irked, rather than afraid, suggested he might not have the answers yet. The former exterminator’s attitude was worsening by the day though.

It’s positive that his spirit hasn’t been crushed, but he’s becoming a problem. Maybe he needs to be isolated from humans.

“I heard from my family for the first time in years, yet you’re limiting contact to pre-recorded messages. You won’t let us watch TV for entertainment, or have access to the internet,” Glim growled. “You avoid every question we ask you. There’s something you don’t

want us to know."

Sara raised her hands. "That's not fair—"

"This isn't fair! I'm still in captivity in my home, here with my own people. Dodgy aliens seem to be running the show. You won't even let us go outside to get a breath of fresh air!"

Haysi was listening in silence. "Sara. T-the museum. I w-want to… visit."

Alarm coursed through my veins, as I knew we couldn't honor their requests. Humans appeared in every form of media, including fiction, and were a popular subject on our internet. Outside of these walls, Glim and Haysi would encounter Terran refugees. Millions of them remained on Venlil Prime, so they could be walking around unmasked *anywhere*.

Sara adjusted her facial garb. "I'm sorry if you feel that our restrictions are unfair. We have no idea what your timetable is to readjust, and we'd like to take things slowly. Better safe than sorry."

"Sensory overload might awaken negative emotions, and slow down your recovery. Discussion of the war is everywhere too," I chimed in. "Maybe you two recover faster than others, but several of your counterparts are shattered. Our goals are set with the average Venlil in mind."

Haysi narrowed her eyes. "H-how did you even free us anyways, Tarva? W-why would the…grays let us go?"

"The Gaians negotiated your release."

"What could the Gaians have that t-the Arxur would want?"

"Strength," Noah's voice rumbled behind me. "Resources."

Glim's pupils snapped back to the doorway. Noah returned with a bowl of fruit, and made a point of grabbing a piece. He raised his full-face mask just enough to eat the food, though his canines were still obscured. The two Venlil studied his furless chin, and his snack choice. The exterminator seemed to relax a little.

Consuming plants should halt predator suspicions, for now. The Terran ambassador offered the fruit to the Venlil, who snagged a few pieces for themselves. He waved a berry-picking hand, and ushered the rescues back to their room. It was a clear attempt to avoid further questions; we had to find a way to give them some of

what they wanted.

Haysi hugged Sara, as the scientist tucked her into bed. The female predator patted the Venlil gently, returning the affectionate gesture. The historian had no clue who her caretaker was; compassion was a trait we once reserved for prey. Until we met humans, we assumed predators were incapable of empathy.

Glim shied away, when Noah tried to adjust his blanket. The exterminator's skeptical look had intensified, following the ambassador's answer about the Arxur. Strength the grays would respect was something to be feared, and not a quality prey should possess. Likewise, the only resources that interested the Dominion was food.

"What d-did you mean by strength and resources?" the male rescue stuttered.

Noah withdrew to the doorway. "We defend ourselves, and we're proactive about it. We can find a scientific solution to anything… manufacture anything, even the unsavory stuff the Arxur want."

"The Arxur w-want cattle…to eat…and killing tools."

"We did what was needed, to get you back. We're going to protect the Venlil from now on."

Haysi whined. "You c-can't protect us from them. Nobody can. Y-you're naïve."

Noah shoved his hands into his pockets, but pride exuded from his posture. There was a hunter's grace in his stride; the way he strutted, arching his spine, asserted dominance. Even with the mask on, I could sense his vicious snarl. The human wouldn't stand for Earth's prowess being called into question.

"Oh Haysi, we already beat the Arxur once. The Federation's only victory, in hundreds of years, was because of us," Noah stated. "Have some faith."

Sara shook her head, slashing her hand in front of her throat. I scurried up to him, and tugged at his wrist. My beloved needed to adjust his behavior, because that speech wasn't prey-like at all. Usually, Noah was more sensitive to our sensibilities. Perhaps it was Glim's profession, goading him into boastfulness?

I dragged the human down the hallway, out of earshot of the

rescues. Noah allowed himself to be maneuvered; there was no way I could move him, without his cooperation. After checking my periphery, to see if either Venlil followed us, I took a deep breath. It was important that I used a hushed voice, to avoid prying ears.

“Why would you tell them that?” I hissed. “Your species found FTL *months ago*, and now you’re telling them you singlehandedly defeated the Arxur. How will they conclude that primitives did that?”

Sara crossed her arms. “Tarva is right. These Venlil aren’t ready for the facts. Remember what sort of reactions we get, from normal people? The exchange programs? Aafa?”

Noah sighed, throwing his hands in the air. “Maybe we should get the truth over with, instead of dodging their questions and locking them up. Glim was an exterminator. Any deceit will make him double down on his pre-existing beliefs.”

“Hold your horses. I know they’re going to find out eventually, but they’ve been here two days. You’d be compromising the identity of all of our people.”

“Glim and Haysi are strong-willed. We could break it to them, in pieces. They deserve to know who Venlil Prime’s closest ally really is.”

“And w-who is that?” a voice squeaked behind us. “Who…are you r-really?”

The Terrans swiveled around to face Haysi, an instinctive reaction. Their uncanny tendency, to look right at a target, tipped off the historian. It was the sign of narrow vision, to snap around a full ninety degrees. I could see fear flash in her eyes. She had realized the truth, or at least part of it.

Haysi backed away, tail drooping between her legs. Sara raised her hands, and took a careful step forward. The female Venlil shrieked, before bolting down the hallway. I could hear her nails scrabbling on the tile, as she slipped in haste to get away. The sounds of crying were audible too, amidst the screams.

The poor thing just realized she hugged a predator. Oh dear.

I positioned myself in Noah’s path, stopping him from following. “Don’t chase her! You’re just going to make it worse.”

The ambassador cursed. “What do we do? We can’t just sit around. She’s going to start a panic!”

“I’ll notify the Venlil doctors, and get someone to calm her down. We should check on Glim now. He must’ve heard the commotion.”

“Yeah, Haysi wasn’t exactly subtle,” Sara said. “Come on, Noah. We don’t need both our patients freaking out.”

The humans raced back into the hospital room. Sara gasped with horror, and Noah’s breathing accelerated to a panicked pace. Catching up to the primates, I saw that both beds were empty. Haysi was obviously long gone, so our goal was to minimize the damage. Glim was nowhere to be found either, though.

The Terran astronauts started scouring the room, since we hadn’t seen the exterminator exit. They crawled on the floor, searching under the beds first. Under different circumstances, it would’ve been amusing to see a human wriggle under tight spaces. But at the moment, my sole thought was locating our Venlil charges.

My gaze landed on the walls and the ceiling, browsing for any clues. A food cart had been moved right under an air duct; the grate was pried open too. A clump of gray hair floated down onto my face, and I shouted for the humans’ attention. Glim must’ve used this passage to mount an escape.

Sara whistled. “Dang, we got a little Houdini here. If he wasn’t an exterminator, I’d be impressed.”

The predators couldn’t fit into the crawl space, and I wasn’t planning to go in there myself. We must operate under the assumption that Glim fled the premises. There was no telling where he would go, and family were his only known associates. Perhaps we should start with relatives’ residences, or extermination offices.

“We have to find Glim. He’s a danger to himself, and any human he comes across,” I said. “The world has changed since he’s been gone.”

Noah ripped his mask off. “This is a fucking disaster. It wasn’t supposed to go like this!”

“Let’s keep our heads. What’s done is done,” Sara offered. “Tarva, do you want us to call in a UN manhunt?”

“Manhunt? I thought you d-didn’t hunt sapients.”

“It’s an expression. For a search party, to capture a deviant.”

“I s-see. If you think it will bring him in safely, do it. I c-can ask the public for help too.”

Noah sighed. “That’s a good idea. We’ll do what we can. I’m sorry.”

The two predators wandered off to make calls, while I fiddled with my holopad. The hospital lockdown should have been tighter, but I never intended to imprison these people. They were supposed to be eased back into the citizenry, and learn the truth gradually.

Human volunteers had signed on to give each rescue proper care, rather than to complicate matters. Perhaps their involvement was unwise, but we couldn’t handle the cattle influx alone. It seemed like a good idea, to give the predators a worthy cause. Most Terran refugees wanted something noble to occupy their day.

The predators needed to track Glim and Haysi down, and bring them around to our side. Hopefully, in time, both Venlil would understand the humans were here to help.

Chapter 80

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

The hospital was placed on lockdown, until every crevice was accounted for. Haysi was found barricaded in a janitor's closet, requiring human volunteers to bust down the door. Venlil took charge of the situation from there, and escorted the historian back to proper lodgings. The predators stayed away, since the female rescue was inconsolable with them nearby.

Sara decided to give Haysi space, but asked Venlil helpers to leave a holopad in the room. The Terran scientist posited that a call was the best chance to plead her case. However, our most pressing priority was Glim; the exterminator was nowhere to be found. I could only imagine his reaction to what lurked outside these premises.

The UN has sent out search parties, but they've found nothing. We need to help.

At my request, a Venlil driver arrived to ferry us to the local extermination office. Noah suggested to start the search with Glim's guild, and I agreed with his reasoning. However, barging into that venue with two famous humans would be awkward. UN representatives usually stayed out of the exterminators' way; that avoidance was a two-way street.

"Noah, I'm begging you, please don't stir up any trouble. We just want to find Glim," I said.

The human snorted. "I'll try. But I hate those people, and I won't lie about it. I wish you'd dismantle their office."

"Change happens slowly. I understand about obligate carnivores now; it's not their fault. Still, I can't take the risk of Venlil being hunted on the street."

"I'm not saying to let predators roam your settlements! Even we wouldn't, er, mostly. But driving entire species to extinction, burning them alive…"

"If you find an animal that you can guarantee won't attack us, I'll spare it. But lesser creatures don't have your agency or restraint…

and I can't take chances. Now stop lecturing me. I never tell you what to do on your planet!"

Sara raised an eyebrow at our spat. The female human muttered something about ecological damage, and I pretended not to hear. While her personality was less confrontational, she had railed against exterminations to any scientific outlet that would listen. Her latest attempts included examples of human farmers enacting similar measures, and discussions of zoonotic diseases.

"Look, I'm sorry for lashing out," I sighed. "But it can feel like humans are bossing the Venlil around, in our own backyard. We're different than you, and the past few months have been a massive culture shock. I've shaken things up enough."

Sara forced a smile. "We both understand that change doesn't happen overnight, and that you can only rock the boat so much. Right, Noah?"

The male human struck a sullen pose, but nodded. "Sorry, Tarva. No problems with the exterminators; I promise."

Noah opened the car door for me, while Sara occupied the front seat. It was a bit disturbing that the predators' referred to that position as "shotgun." Was it a standard practice to gun down passerbys, when motor vehicles were first invented on Earth? I didn't understand why the preferrable seat was associated with a weapon.

Sara rotated a holopad in her hands, a sad look in her eyes. I could see she wanted to contact Haysi, but was afraid of worsening the situation. Our car sped off down the road, and I whacked my prosthetic tail against her seat. Her gaze darted back over her shoulder, locking with mine. Though their interactions spanned a day, it was apparent the human and Haysi had grown attached.

"Put your mask on, and try to talk to Haysi. I bet she's scared silly, and losing any newfound hope of freedom," I whispered. "You can't hurt her through a call, right?"

The Terran scientist twisted her dark curls. "I don't know. The way she looked at us…"

"I looked at you the same way when we first met, and now here I am, using Noah as a pillow. It's worth a shot with Haysi. Have a little faith in her."

Sara took a deep breath, and slipped her face covering back on. The ‘Gaian’ extended a video call to Haysi’s device, waiting with bated breath. The request went unanswered for agonizing seconds, and rang until reaching the default voicemail. It seemed the Venlil rescue wasn’t in a talking mood.

The scientist was quiet for a long moment, swallowing hard. The human steadied her face in the frame, and dialed the number once more. I waved in the background, hoping the preview would make Haysi curious. The voicemail began to play again, before coming to an abrupt halt.

A timid Venlil face appeared on screen. “Venlil Prime has f-fallen. I…should be…resigned t-to this. Why did you have…to give me hope?”

“Haysi, please, just hear me out. We’re here because our home was attacked. Our largest cities are destroyed,” Sara pleaded. “Governor Tarva was kind enough to take Gaian refugees, so we offered to help you as a way to give back. It’s not what you think.”

“I t-trusted you.”

“I am sorry you found out like this. The truth is, my species has forward-facing eyes, and we’re territorial. Because of those two things, everyone assumes we’re like the Arxur. Including the Arxur.”

“M-mask.”

“We wore the masks because we didn’t want to scare you. We’re aware how Venlil react to us. It wasn’t meant as deception.”

“No. T-take the mask off.”

Sara lowered her head, before reaching for the straps. She pulled the mask over her skull, and straightened her dark hair. The Venlil historian froze at the predatory creature on screen. The Terran scientist’s eyebrows knitted together with concern. Perhaps it was my imagination, but her binocular eyes seemed to tear up too.

Haysi pressed a paw to her mouth, squeaking incoherently. I could see her swoon on her feet, as the current of fear almost swept her away. When the rescue snapped out of her stupor, she lunged for the holopad. It was a blur of panicked motion, a scramble to terminate the call. There wasn’t a good-bye, or even a vocalization of her fear.

Well, that went poorly. Now our historian friend has a face to put with the nightmare.

With Haysi disconnecting, Sara cast a blank stare at her own reflection. I unclipped my seatbelt, hugging the predator from behind. Her lips curved upward, and she squeezed my paw. Noah offered a sympathetic smile, as he met his coworker's eyes. These two humans were my closest friends; I didn't want to see them hurt by Venlil.

"Are you okay, Sara?" I signaled 'I love you' with my prosthetic, hoping the scientist had learned a bit of our tail language. "It's not your fault."

She offered a grateful nod. "I feel terrible for adding to Haysi's trauma. Now, I'm just another monster to her. What she went through with the Arxur…she doesn't need anything else to fear."

"These people have serious issues, that have nothing to do with humans. You're part of our society now. They'd have to learn to deal with you, regardless."

Noah sighed. "I don't know if we can ask them to deal with predators. It feels wrong. We remind them of a deeply traumatic experience."

"Exactly. We have no right to force ourselves into their lives," Sara agreed.

"Well, that's a decision they can make for themselves," I said. "Humans have been an immense help for this program, and you did nothing wrong. Venlil infrastructure would collapse without you chipping in."

"It's the least we could do, Tarva. We want the best for these people. Nobody deserves to be treated like an animal."

The shriek of a siren pierced the air, as our vehicle neared the extermination office. Venlil wearing flameproof attire stood in a flatbed, with other equipment tucked behind them. A chill crept down my spine, wondering what they were responding to. Was there really a major infestation, so close to the capital? Government affairs might have to be placed on temporary hiatus, or moved to an emergency bunker.

The humans gazed out the window, expressions tinged with apprehension. Our stop was a building full of professionals, whose

sole purpose was to wipe out predators. There was a reason I'd tried to keep the guild from interacting with UN personnel. The strongest opposition to the Terrans came from within exterminator ranks; Venlil Prime was a staging ground for their political statements.

When refugees from Earth first arrived, most 'predator sightings' turned out to be humans. Terrans were involved in isolated cases of petty crime, though nothing beyond Venlil malfeasance. Vandalism, assault, and robbery weren't constructs of the primates.

However, witnesses had a tendency to phone exterminators about Terran criminals, rather than standard police. It was a miracle that none of the confrontations ended with a toasted human, so far.

I told the exterminators to defer details of human cases to police. To use guns, not flamethrowers, if necessary and unavoidable. The question is if everyone listens…

Sara grimaced. "Do you really think Glim is here?"

"Could be. Only one way to find out," Noah answered.

I swished my prosthetic tail in agreement. "This wasn't where Glim worked, but it would be a familiar place. Noah told him that exterminator was a controversial profession; he might seek answers from the guild."

The chocolate-skinned human exited the vehicle, and I wriggled out behind him. The Terran ambassador took my paw in his hand, bringing me close. Sara fell in beside us as well, with a tentative smile. It was clear the predators wanted to show unity, since exterminators would be less hostile to their governor. Then again, I wasn't a popular figure to their guild.

The exterminator's workplace was modest from the outside. The stucco exterior was painted a neutral gray, which made the octagonal building look like a smokestack. The front door bore a "Now hiring" sign, along with a list of dangerous Earth animals to report. Some of the images sent a shudder down my spine; still, I was relieved to see that humans weren't on this montage.

A Venlil was seated at the welcome desk, and she looked up as we entered the building. Her eyes widened at the two humans in her lobby.

"Ambassador Noah, Science Officer Sara, and Governor Tarva?" The Venlil exhaled in confusion, though she didn't seem afraid. "This is

a surprise. I'm Volek, with the public relations department. I'll be happy to arrange a tour, if you'll wait a moment."

Noah scrunched his nose. "You're used to seeing humans?"

"Of course. This is the capital of Venlil Prime, where most human refugees live. Many stop by to challenge or protest our work, and we hope they leave educated on the necessity of our services. We even hired a few Terrans for pest control: an interesting concept, by the way."

"Hold on, Volek. You don't want us all dead?" Sara asked.

"Not unless a specific human starts hunting here…ah, don't worry about that. I'm sure that won't happen, right? We're a progressive office, so we've terminated any employees who discriminate against you. This month, we also implemented a total ban on flamethrowers against infant animals!"

The Terran astronauts looked flabbergasted, at a loss for words. Even I hadn't heard that the extermination officers were recruiting human employees, and scaling back incendiary devices. Perhaps co-existence between the guild and the predators was possible. It just would take time for other Venlil outposts to fall in line.

Noah shoved his hands in his pockets. "Where was the truck we saw going?"

"Don't get me started. We've told you people time and again not to bring your pets, and humans still sneak them in!" Volek flailed her tail in an animated gesture, before calming down. "Another report of a 'cat' loose on a street. Those things are monstrosities!"

"Wait. What is a cat?" I chimed in.

"One of the most invasive, destructive predators on Earth. If you get humans to be open, they'll admit that cats have driven multiple species extinct. That felines hunt for fun, and are *still* common pets."

My eyes widened in horror. The United Nations obscured the human penchant for entertainment animals during first contact; it only became known after widespread interactions with Terran civilians. Noah insisted the practice was about companionship and pack-bonding, with non-sapients. However, this cat didn't sound anything like the innocuous descriptors he assigned to pets.

My expression morphed into a scowl. “Are you kidding me, Noah? Is this true?”

“Pretty accurate, yeah,” he grumbled.

Sara scratched her head. “I’m not even going to argue whether cats are a problem. Our own ecologists agree with Volek.”

“Then why do you keep them as pets?!”

“Because they’re cute and cuddly?” Noah offered.

I huffed in irritation. “I hate you.”

“Thanks.”

Volek gathered up some pamphlets, and acted bored by the response to the cat rationale. Noah’s answer must be standard for a human; it was baffling that our friends saw dangerous predators as cute. It defied all self-preservation that primates should possess. If their ancestors were prey, shouldn’t their instincts spark wariness of feral beasts?

“Here you go,” the exterminator said, passing the brochures out. “It’s a full explanation of the scope of our operations.”

Noah took a step back. “Thanks, Volek? Listen, we’re just here to ask you a few questions.”

“Happy to answer! Before you ask about me, I joined the guild ten years ago. We have a job that not many people want to do, but we know how integral we are to protecting our loved ones and our homes. Animal suffering is *not* the goal—”

“I’m sorry, we’ve gotten off-topic here. That’s completely on us. We’re looking for someone.”

The Terran ambassador swiped at his holopad, showing Volek a recent photograph of Glim. The public relations specialist studied the image, and her pupils lingered on his neck brand. Realization flashed in her gaze, as she put the pieces together. The cattle exchange was a publicized success story, with the credit attributed to Secretary-General Zhao.

Volek flicked her ears. “I don’t recognize him. This, um, rescue escaped? Why would you think he’s here?”

“Because Glim used to be an extermination officer,” Sara replied. “I don’t know how much he suspected us, but it was enough to run

off. There's no telling where he is, or what he'll do."

I cleared my throat. "Even if he's not here now, it's possible he'll turn up. We'd appreciate your help."

"Absolutely, I understand. I'd like a copy of your contact information, and that photo," Volek said. "If any of our people see him, we'll notify you."

Noah nodded. "Thank you. I guess we're back at square one."

The Venlil straightened her tail, imploring the humans to wait. She scanned a map on her holodisplay, and zoomed in on the hospital. From there, the exterminator obtained a route to the closest public transportation. I watched with interest, as she selected a tram station.

Volek pointed with her tail. "If I were you, I would ask around here. Lots of people on the run try to get as far away as possible. But nobody is going to make it far on foot, of course; a mile is a miracle. Assuming Glim knows the capital's layout, he might look for public transit."

"That's actually a good idea. Thanks," Noah said.

Sara cleared her throat. "Volek, how did you arrive at that conclusion so fast?"

"We track a few people ourselves. Investigating reports of predator disease, you know."

The male human gritted his teeth. "Yes, we do know. Let's get going, Tarva."

The Terrans departed the office, and we hustled back toward our vehicle. A few pedestrians spotted the most famous humans leaving the extermination headquarters. Noah and Sara paid no mind to the holopad photos taken of them. Both were used to stares, whenever they made an appearance.

The three of us hopped into the car, and set a course for the train station. If we didn't locate Glim soon, he could wind up anywhere on the planet. The rescue would become untraceable, a needle in a vast haystack. Perhaps he would reunite with the less "progressive" extermination sects.

It wasn't in humanity's best interest to let a wild card slip away.

Chapter 81

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Kalsim, Krakotl Alliance Command*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

Total isolation was enough to drive any social creature to insanity. The humans deposited me in a musty cell, lacking any windows or light. There was nothing to occupy myself with besides tallying each meal on the wall with my talons. Seventy-five notches were carved into the stone, and I'd ran a wing over each one a hundred times.

My wing, which had been broken by the charming Doctor Zarn, was fully healed now. I screamed at the predators to take my cast off when they brought my last meal. To their credit, the monstrosities did take me to a 'doctor', whose dark pupils gleamed with disdain. Humans spoke empty words of a trial, but I knew that was mere posturing. The social hunters' compassion was absent, when I was around.

Visual and auditory hallucinations plagued me, as sheer boredom set in. I had too much time to meditate on the bombing of Earth, and how Arjun might be hunting in the ruins of a city. My thoughts also drifted to what Manoj and the soldiers had done with Thyon, my first officer, in his injured state. The poor Farsul was probably rotting in a cell too, with no clue what had transpired during the battle.

One second, Thyon bumped his head on my ship. The next one, he woke up missing an arm, in the predators' prison.

Despite the primal fear their appearance instilled, I relished when UN soldiers barged into the room. The predators would occasionally drag me to cells with bright lights and loud noises; the guards didn't want to get their hands dirty. The worst action they took themselves was blasting me with frigid water from a hose, laughing as I ran from it.

If footage of them beating a prisoner came to light, it would reveal too much to their plaything allies. Drenching me in ice-water could be passed off as a beast's bathing methods. At least when the predators indulged in sadistic fun, I felt something. Humans just

didn't understand how I tried to minimize their suffering; how I only made the necessary sacrifices for the greater good.

"GET UP AND COME WITH US! NOW!" The door creaked open, flooding my sensitive eyes with artificial light. "Move it, you fucking bird-brain! Do you think we have all day?"

A contingent of humans amassed in my cell. They yanked me to my feet, and pulled at the chain wrapped around my ankle. I stumbled along, straining to remember their redemptive attributes. The beasts were capable of rudimentary compassion; they were just angry about their cultural losses. Resisting their hunger around me likely increased their aggression.

"Cheer up, Chirpy. Today's your lucky day," a predator sneered. "You have a visitor."

My beak parted with hope. "Arjun?"

The UN wardens gave me rough shoves down the corridor, herding me into a visiting area. The space was dusty from disuse, and each metal table was unoccupied. Humanity had no intent of allowing our families to get in touch; not that anyone from Nishtal was alive, in all likelihood. Sacrificing my own world was what truly haunted me, in those endless hours alone.

A group of Terran dignitaries escorted a Harchen into the area, and my heart sank with disappointment. A traitorous impulse wanted Arjun to check on me, to reassure me that he was still fighting his battle with hunger. I knew the predator kid would become cruel eventually, but I didn't want him to devolve so young.

The Harchen visitor was carrying camera equipment, and wearing a badge with Terran scribbles on it. Oddly enough, the humans' demeanor was mostly friendly, apart from their toothy snarls. The primates weren't coercing the short reptile along; a black-haired man jabbered to her about restaurants in the area. I caught the words "Zurulian-Italian fusion" in the human's sales pitch.

Why was this prey creature treated to such cordiality? Was she a traitor to her race?

The Harchen extended a paw to the chatty human, who grasped it in his own. "Listen Zhao, if I see something here that isn't right, I'm going to report on it. I won't hide the truth, just because it might hurt your organization."

“We’d respect you less if you became a mouthpiece, Cilany,” the human answered. “There’s a reason the UN granted you citizenship. You gave us the people responsible for this mess.”

“Mr. Secretary-General, I simply believe that everyone has the right to self-determination. I’ll be watching what you do to Fahl closely. Serving us up to the Arxur was a cold move. Now, you’re occupying us.”

“You can thank the little birdie over there for that. We warned Kalsim, and he kept going…lied to his own people to convince them. He wanted to kill us, more than he wanted to defend his home. Actions have consequences.”

“I understand. Still, I hope that you don’t plan to gamble with civilian populaces in the future, Zhao.”

“Plan on it? No. But a hundred human lives are worth more than a hundred *million* aliens, in my book.”

Cilany narrowed her eyes. “That’s the kind of rhetoric that worries me. Let’s just get this interview finished.”

The Harchen’s yellow skin looked flaky around the neckline, which suggested she was about to shed. From what I’d overheard of her conversation, the humans had gained control of Fahl and its subsidiaries. The Arxur did the dirty work, then the primates swooped in to conquer the planet. It was exactly what I predicted to Arjun; Terrans would replicate their subjugation practices from Earth, if given the chance.

Was Nishtal being forced into the predators’ empire at this moment? Were Krakotl citizens enslaved to serve the power-hungry humans? I wasn’t sure if that was a worse fate than the Arxur finishing us off. At least it would send a message to the galaxy, that Terrans hadn’t changed a bit.

Humanity needs damage control. This Harchen would know what to say to prey allies, better than a predator could guess at.

Perhaps this Cilany figure achieved preferential treatment by aiding Earth’s propaganda efforts. It wasn’t clear what else a reporter could offer. I couldn’t believe she would sell her own planet out so easily. The Harchen established her camera setup, before turning to me.

Cilany tilted her head. “Captain Kalsim. How are you doing?”

“Been better. The humans never plan on giving me that farcical trial, and it wouldn’t matter if they did,” I grumbled.

“Actually, your trial is scheduled for later this week. Humanity’s Federation allies agreed to listen to your case alongside predator judges…and they got a Venlil lawyer for you. It’s expected to be an easy conviction, though. Regardless of sympathy for Earth, you sentenced your own planets to death too.”

“So you’re here to slander me in the court of public opinion.”

“No. I’m working on a story analyzing the Kolshians’ first victims, and I couldn’t think of a better POW to get a quote from. After recent events, do you stand by your infamous comparison between predators and viruses?”

“I’m sorry? The Kolshians’ first victims? I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m not interested in a hit piece on the Commonwealth.”

The reporter’s eyes widened. “Wait, the humans haven’t told you? About Nikonus’ confession?”

I tossed my beak in a noncommittal gesture, and Cilany reached for her holopad. The words I told Manoj and the Terran internet, regarding humanity’s infectious potential, stood the test of time. Predators’ higher functions were inadequate against all-encompassing bloodlust; it wasn’t their fault for caving to their wiring. What information could make me recant the truth?

The Harchen slid a holopad over to me, with a video clip cued up. The Kolshian presider was a familiar countenance on screen. The wrinkles on his gelatinous features likened him to a pruned berry. Why was Secretary-General Zhao listening in, and baring his teeth as I watched? I didn’t understand what the purpose of politics was to me, from a jail cell.

My mistrust of the reporter was growing, but this was my first social interaction in weeks. If I didn’t play along for a bit, the humans would toss me back in an empty cell. My gaze shifted down to the holopad, and I decided to listen. Even from prison, I could still perform my duty to refute predatory narratives.

Nikonus recounted the Federation’s origin tale briefly, from his aquarium-lined office on Aafa. He only mentioned the Farsul’s role, at first. Cilany chimed in with the third founding species: the

Krakotl. The Kolshian indulged in a long-winded response, and clarified why my kind were a problem.

"*…ill-equipped for spacefaring. We learned they were scavengers, who would occasionally go for fish as well.*"

Shock coursed through my veins, and I struggled to suppress an emotional response. The leader's statement didn't seem coerced; there were no signs of human presence in the footage. If anything, Nikonus' tone was smug and gloating, a wholly authentic admission. The talons that I used for grasping objects took on a darker appearance.

The horror intensified its assault; eating meat conflicted with every value in my psyche. The Kolshian wouldn't stop speaking, as much as I wanted his words to cease. He proclaimed that the Krakotl were threatened into submission, before a genetic cure was distributed. The Farsul States' work was thorough too, with revisions to history, fossil records, and education.

How could that statement be true? My life was dedicated to wiping predators off the face of Nishtal. Bloodlust never fogged my mind, even when dealing with abhorrent creatures. Killing clung to my conscience with a heavy grip, and I hated the necessity of my profession.

"Kalsim!" Cilany hissed. "You look like you're going to be sick. Do you need a minute?"

I flapped my wings with discomfort. "N-no. I, um, can't imagine Krakotl as…predators. But it's wrong to hate a creature for existing, like I always said. If we were born that way, it's no more our fault than it is for the humans…"

"You're not angry with Nikonus?"

"I find their success impressive. If co-existence with us was improbable, the Kolshians did the right thing. It wasn't personal…it was necessary. T-they avoided the unpleasantry of killing a sapient species."

Zhao crossed his arms in the background, and his expression hardened. I puffed out my feathers, trying to swallow the nausea. It didn't compute with my brain that Krakotl were like the humans. I should be grateful to the Kolshians, for saving me from squandering my sapience.

My musings turned to what I had done to Earth, not knowing there was a viable alternative. Chief Nikonus should've told us the truth sooner. Throughout the battle, my conscience had wrestled with non-lethal solutions to the Terran menace. Preserving the positive aspects of their culture was on my mind from the beginning.

Predators or not, the humans aren't all bad. But I thought such a vicious history mandated their extinction.

It broke my heart to realize that bombing Terran civilians could've been avoided. Humanity should've been offered the cure, which took bloodthirsty instincts out of the equation. What if humans could be herbivores? We didn't need to eradicate them, if a conversion was negotiated.

Tears streamed down my face, at the scale of the unnecessary death. Arjun and Manoj haunted my thoughts. The father suppressed its instincts out of affection for the child. Was that not a sliver of good? Was that not proof that humans could have been saved…and could have made the right choice?

Guilt tightened my throat. "I'm sorry, humans. Killing your people was never something I wanted to do. I wish I knew…I would've given you the option to take the cure. I just didn't realize there *was* another option for dealing with predators."

"The humans came in peace in their natural state, Kalsim," Cilany said. "That was the other option."

"D-do they really want peace? Then…listen Zhao, your people could still take the cure, and end this. You could be rid of your sordid appetite, for good. Prove you won't be a t-threat…or relapse."

"I don't need to be cured of my culture and personality." Zhao's growl was measured, and he waved to the guards to return me to my cell. "But thanks for asking."

The chain yanked at my ankle, and for the first time in weeks, I resisted. An extermination officer understood that predators killed by nature. In a human's addled state, this 'Secretary-General' didn't want to relinquish his hunting prowess. I had the chance to make him see how much better off the Krakotl were post-conversion.

I wasn't born solely to spread death anymore. The Kolshians' medicine granted us a purpose, and a chance at developing values.

The Krakotl Alliance owed the precursors a thousand years of true civilization…of survival. To return to our predatory past would mean being nothing but beasts.

“Take the cure! The Venlil would want you to do it! Who *wants* to be a predator anyways? Are you scared of being ruled by compassion?!” I squawked.

Zhao bared his teeth. “You’re the one scared of your own shadow. Of simply being yourself…your natural self. It‘s actually sad.”

“Your natural self is an instrument of death! Your depravity is a menace to the galactic community. It’s why you’re a pawn to the Arxur! YOU NEED TO REPENT!”

“Goodbye, Kalsim. We’ll see you in court.”

The UN soldiers dragged me across the floor, and I screeched in protest. If there was a chance at saving the predators, they needed to give themselves a chance. All we asked was to conform to standards of decency, and pull their better side to the forefront.

Cilany’s camera had filmed my desperate plea, at least. I hoped some human viewers were more reasonable than Zhao. This was likely the last the public would hear from me; I knew my trial would conclude with a harsh execution. Death would be welcome, as opposed to remaining in the Terrans’ custody.

For the unnecessary genocide of a species, without exhausting other options, execution was an apt punishment. I had tried to show the Terrans mercy, but I hadn’t shown them the mercy that was gifted to my kind. In hindsight, the raid was a mistake.

Other Krakotl might think of us as predators still, but Terran sadism was beneath our modern sensibilities. There was nothing to be ashamed of, in breaking the shackles of bloodlust. My heart ached solely for Earth, knowing that my cleansing had been misguided. We had more in common with the primates than even I thought.

Then again, if the humans would reject help, maybe they deserved the fate they’d been given. The Kolshians and the Farsul were experts in conversions, right? Nikonus would’ve intervened in our raid, had a cure been a possibility. The Farsul outright participated in our strike; there had to be a reason for that.

Simply put, a Terran’s ‘good side’ must not exist in large enough quantities to salvage. The truth wasn’t always an easy pill to

swallow.

Chapter 82

Memory transcription subject:*Glim, Venlil Rescue*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

Compartmentalizing emotions was the only way to survive an Arxur farm. When you were subjected to unspeakable conditions, your logical brain dissociated to protect itself. There was no hope of escape on Wriss, and the predatory Arxur didn't show mercy. Screamers and runners got killed first; we all learned that catatonic responses were the best way to indulge instincts.

Yesterday was an unusual reprieve from the squalor. The first oddity I remembered was the Arxur herding us into the cattle ships; the gray pilots emanated particular disdain. I thought our destination was a slaughterhouse. The next thing I knew, Noah had me in his warm arms. His sleek mask was jet black, and spit my reflection back at me. The Venlil that stared back was filthy, with empty eyes and old scars.

Am I going to be Glim, or the string of numbers I recited to the Gaian?

Once it sank in that I was on Venlil Prime, the degrading years felt like they happened to someone else. Captivity became a nightmare I had memorized in vivid detail. My mind focused on the masked aliens, as a distraction from the flashbacks. Noah and Sara were an enigma for me to unravel. Even beneath the garments, their muscular, tailless form attracted attention.

Concentrating on them tickled something in the back of my mind. The longer I looked, the more I felt like a child watching shadows move in my closet. There was something not right with the cues hitting my visual receptors. Additionally, the Gaians behaved as though this program was their brainchild, and were elusive on basic questions. That suggested their interference wasn't benign as they disclosed.

To top it off, Governor Tarva answered the greatest mystery of all: why the Arxur released us. She claimed that the Gaians negotiated our release…*with thepredators*! Noah's voice shook with a throaty growl, when he boasted of his species' strength. The instincts I'd suppressed on Wriss were rekindled, once the male alien went to tuck me in.

“I don’t understand. Why would the Gaians trigger my instincts?” I muttered, as the caretaker left the room. “These aliens have been nice to us, mostly. We saw them eat fruit.”

Haysi flung off the bed covers. “I’m just tired of their games. Beating the Arxur’s not possible….t-they don’t need to lie to us.”

“You know, I didn’t feel like they were lying. Noah spoke with conviction, and t-the g-grays did get rid of us for some reason. Nobody challenged his story.”

“B-but the Arxur were made to k-kill. They’re unstoppable in c-combat.”

“I know, Haysi. Something’s rotten with this place. Have you noticed how these Gaians are the ones trapping us here?”

“Trapping? Glim, we’re safe at home, and they’re providing for us. Like Sara said, they’re just taking things slow, for our sake.”

“All I want…is to see my family. It would be beneficial for my health, I guarantee any doctor would agree. Why wouldn’t these aliens allow it?!”

“The aliens must be busy, but I’ll ask nicely for you. Maybe Tarva can set up a call.”

The former historian hopped out of the bed, and scurried out into the hallway. I had a feeling Noah and Sara wouldn’t comply with any requests. These aliens were gentle during our upkeep, but then spewed dishonesty in the next breath. The few answers they gave us, such as inventing FTL before the Federation discovered them, made no sense.

The biggest fib of all was the mask. In my estimation, no species could wear full-face shields in daily life. How was that practice suitable for eating, or searching for mates? Watching Noah lift it to insert fruit cemented my point. The Gaian’s posture had been odd, as though his hand was positioned to hide his teeth.

I’m going to find a way out of here. I’m not an Arxur’s number anymore; I won’t be treated as a slave by non-predators too!

A ceiling vent caught my eyes, though I wasn’t tall enough to reach it. Thinking quickly, I shoved a food cart beneath the opening. Haysi screamed in the background, which spurred me to rush my escape. I grabbed the scissors Sara had used to trim our overgrown

pelts. Perhaps the instrument could be used to dislodge the grate.

I wedged the blade under a loose screw, and popped the bolt out of its socket. Pulling with all my might, I wrenched the vent out of its sealed position. Voices echoed nearby, with my name among the words spoken. Cool metal hugged my shallow ribcage, as I slithered into the crawlspace.

Claustrophobia kicked in at once; the narrow space brought back unwelcome memories. It was like being packed in a cattle pen, all over again. The enclosure was so dense with Venlil that I couldn't breathe, but I managed to settle down on the caky dirt to sleep. Wailing noises flooded my ears, and my paws were twisted together.

"*Lesser creatures,*" *an Arxur guard mused. "Drop a fleck of a leaf in there, and they dive on it as one.*"

Its comrade snorted. "Animals in an animal's place. It's a shame their pups can't be eaten twice. They scream so wonderfully."

All I could manage was to drag myself forward with my paws, and hold an internal wail down. Images of the grays dragging pups away flashed through my mind. Their yellow fangs were on full display, as they stomped through the pen and scanned us. Their forward-facing eyes landed near me, triangular slits on alert. I wondered if I was the prize they'd eat 'fresh' today.

"I don't want to be prey!" I squealed. "Make it stop! PLEASE!"

My forehead connected with a wall, and I winced at the sudden pain. There was no telling how long I'd been moving in a trance… likely a couple minutes. Another grate sat before me, with crisp airflow; I kicked the metal out with my hindlegs. There was a short drop down to a dumpster, which acted as a step to the outdoors.

I flung myself prone on the grass, wiggling my claws between blades. Having our sun on my back, and pressing my face into the greenery, I knew that I was home. Laughter spilled from my throat, as I tore up clumps of dirt with my claws. This was all I wanted those Gaians to give us; a proper reunion with Venlil Prime and our loved ones.

Now, it's time to secure the latter. I never thought I'd see my family again. Will they even recognize me?

My paws steered me to a courtyard, where alien caretakers were

eating their lunch. Two Gaians sat with their backs to me, munching on slices of bread. The purple liquid between the grains was the color of Krakotl blood. The aliens were not wearing their masks with each other, confirming my theory.

"…millions of people, who haven't been home in years." The Gaian's voice reverberated in his chest, projecting aggression. The harsh barks were like a dagger to my heart. "The Venlil who were born in captivity, they are utterly convinced they're animals. One asked me why we took them from the Arxur. So calmly and, I…"

The other Gaian shook his head. "That's so sad, Kyle. To think that's all those poor Venlil have known! I can't imagine what they're feeling."

"These are cases of extreme trauma, with no clinical precedent. I don't mean to sound like a pessimist, but I'd imagine at least forty percent of the Venlil here never recover enough to live on their own."

"We can't sustain a program like this forever. Humanity bit off more than we can chew here. After we win the war, our allies are going to have to take some of the load."

"But Federation psychology is a joke, Tanner. Humans have the best ideas on treating trauma and providing therapy."

"There's only so much we can do; we have our own problems. I don't mean to sound heartless, this just sounds like a losing battle."

"If we can help half of these people get on their feet, that's not a losing battle. We're morally obligated to help the Venlil, of all species. I'd be dead back in Johannesburg without them."

Their cadence sounded like it came from a teenage Arxur. Deeper voices evolved to convey power, and to frighten other animals into submission. The latter effect was taking hold of me, but my curiosity was still kicking. This was my chance to see a Gaian's anatomical features, of which Sara refused to provide diagrams.

I tuned out their gravelly chatter, and slunk behind some bushes to get a better angle. At first, I caught only a glimpse of their temples, and didn't process why that was incorrect. Further inspection lent the full picture. Sockets sat above their furless cheeks, and were smushed up against their nose.

Of course, not a sliver of their eyes had been visible from the side…

Panic exploded in my sternum, searing into my lungs like smoke inhalation. These Gaians' pupils faced directly ahead, without any peripheral tilt. Their irises were encompassed by a white shell, which made the pupil movements jerkier and more noticeable. I could read distinct hunger as if it were spelled out.

What kind of mammal had no pigment in their scleras, and a shaven face? An involuntary shudder rolled down my spine; these predators were abominations of the worst kind. Even an Arxur would cower at such a sight! I couldn't believe that such a vicious creature was hiding under Noah's mask. That was Noah, who sat next to me for Jenga…who reminded me I had a name.

We're not free at all. Venlil Prime has been conquered by predators, I realized. *The Arxur transferred us to the custody of a species just like them.*

The Gaians weren't capable of compassion, and shouldn't tend to traumatized creatures like us. Governor Tarva must've convinced them it was beneficial to their diet. Perhaps these hunters allowed sapient cattle to live normal existences, until their number was drawn. Happy Venlil meant a well-fed entrée, and unforced reproduction…

"If this w-world is a comfortable cattle pen, that means the Gaians might stay away from the cities," I whispered. "I've got to find my family…learn how this happened."

My legs started running, despite the weakness from years of being penned. Sobbing from despair, I sprinted through the parking lot. There was an occasional glance to ensure the Gaians weren't giving chase. All I could picture was Noah's white-cloaked eyes, glistening with hunger and cruelty beneath its mask. Maybe it started growling and left the Jenga game, because its appetite was stirred.

Predators existed to root out weakness, and to specialize in death and brutality. Their defining instinct was aggression, and their 'philosophy' was survival of the fittest. The rescues…our delicacy must have tantalized them, from the start. Governor Tarva had done excellent at masking her fear, but that spoke wonders about how long these *things* had been defiling my world.

Venlil Prime's capital design was circular, with buildings further from the governor's mansion spread out in increasingly wider arcs. Most residences were in the larger bands, whereas businesses were

part of the inner rings. If our facility was the main hospital, it'd be centralized to service the whole district. A block away from the facility, that was why I encountered dive bars and hotels, alongside increased foot traffic.

Maybe there was a place to seek refuge in this commercial plaza. The panic was beginning to subside, but I needed time to process my responses. For one, what happened to other…'controversial' exterminators? Answers were next on my agenda; it wasn't clear if any Venlil were resisting the predators.

I staggered into a local brewery, spotting mounted holoscreens through the window. The establishment wasn't busy, but a Venlil bartender looked up as I entered. Perhaps she could lend me her holopad, so I could call my aunt. Aunt Thima took me in after my mother died, and parented me to adulthood. If anyone would tell me the truth of the Venlil collapse, it would be her.

The bartender perked her ears up. "Hello, good sir! What can I interest you in? Our special today is grapefruit-flavored malt liquor; authentic predator taste in a Venlil drink!"

I gaped at her for several seconds, throwing a terrified glance at the tap spouts behind the counter. The bar's patrons were giving me odd looks, as they noticed my emaciated ribs. My feet suddenly felt unsteady, and I sank into a bar stool. The barkeep pinned her ears back in concern, before handing me a glass of water.

I lapped down the liquid. "T-thanks, bartender. P-predator taste, you said?"

"Yep! The human farms nearby are making a pretty credit with 'exotic' fruits," she replied cheerily. "Most of the crops go back to Earth, but Venlil businesses buy up the leftovers."

I caressed the empty water glass, trying to process her unabashed explanation. This 'human' word was one I'd caught first from the snacking Gaians, and now in reference to predator farms…whatever that meant. Maybe their species name wasn't Gaian; it must be human. If they'd lied about everything else, why wouldn't the moniker be false?

The fact that predators grew fruit was odd, but Noah and the lunching humans had shown that they varied their diet with plants. Any surplus growth could go to the cattle; I assumed they had a

sizable population on their world. Why would Venlil businesses market cattle-feed beverages though? What ghastly price was needed to 'buy' fruit from a hunter?

"You trade with *them?* Are you insane?" I hissed.

"I won't tolerate racism in this establishment." The bartender bared her teeth at me, and swiped my glass away. "I sponsored a human refugee, bless his heart; he was part of a group from a Terran orphanage. The poor thing was so young, and so eager to please. A hard life made harder."

"Refugee? I don't understand."

"Everyone knows why humans came here. What they lost. Are you okay, sir?"

"Uh, f-fine. Sorry, just having a rough day."

The barkeep looked unconvinced, but she returned to wiping down the counters. I decided I wouldn't be asking this delusional employee for a communications device. She'd probably report me to my 'Gaian' overlords just as soon. However, I could access the television broadcasts that Noah refused to let us see. That would reveal the propaganda these humans were forcefeeding the masses.

A male Venlil, captioned with the name 'General Kam', was speaking on a holoscreen. The audio was muted, but a subtitles ticker rolled underneath his picture. The feed occasionally switched over to an anchor, or some B-roll video. I leaned forward, curious to see how much of our culture survived.

"*…the humans have amassed an unlikely group of allies, so I don't see why the odds are against us. It's the Kolshians and the Federation who lack unity. I'm proud to stand with Governor Tarva, in throwing off Federation tyranny. I have nothing but praise for the Secretary-General, and how effective Earth has been on the offensive,*" Kam was saying.

The anchor's eyes widened. "*But don't you think humanity is spreading their forces too thin? The Terran military is taking on engagements at Khoa, Sillis, Fahl, and other undisclosed operations. Per sources close to Tarva, the Arxur are becoming restless.*"

"*If you're asking why we don't hit Aafa right away, it's because humans are patient hunters. We have to trust our friends. The Arxur, believe it or not, are invaluable in supplementing our fleet.*"

Horror flooded my chest, as I listened to the matter-of-fact discussions of a galaxywide war. The media was a state-run television channel now, where our generals surfaced to brag about the predators' conquest. General Kam was spinning this narrative of friendship, while talking about conflict with the entire Federation. These humans must be forcing us to be slaves for their militaries.

I palmed my head in defeat. "Hey, bartender…w-what happened to that predator 'refugee?'"

"I'm working on adopting him. We barely have enough to make ends meet, even with the government stipends," the Venlil barkeep replied. "But I can give him love and support. Humans need a nurturing environment. They're simple creatures, really."

"You think you can raise a monster as a prey child?! Put it under your roof like a Venlil?! It doesn't want your love. It wants to EAT YOU!"

"How dare you speak like that about my son! You're disgusting. Get the fuck out of my bar."

Other customers murmured in agreement, shooting looks of loathing at me. I wasn't sure how the predators got these Venlil on their side, but they must possess some crafty indoctrination methods. Noah and Sara were starting to work their witchery on us, back at the program. It was a good thing I escaped before that settled in.

Signs of predator contamination were all around me, as I staggered out of the bar. One human was intermingling with a group of Venlil, and bared its teeth during the conversation. None of my people seemed fazed by the pointed canines, which were an obvious threat display. This level of pacification was absurd…it was like Venlil instincts were erased.

There was little the demons hadn't touched. An advertising poster read 'Escape from the Cradle', and featured a star-studded cast… mixed with predator scribbles. A 'Gaian' was pictured in a shuttle next to Venlil movie star Mava, who was famous in my day. How could a film star act out scenes alongside a beast? Why would the human lead agree to pose with tears running down its face?

Faint music drifted to my ears, an upbeat strumming pattern that flowed into a string of notes. I breathed a sigh of relief, and

scampered toward the sound. This was a chance to get away from any humans, since predators would view emotional expression as a foolish endeavor. Prying an honest assessment from Venlil skeptics would need to be done out of bestial earshot.

“Cool song,” I practiced to myself. “Can I please borrow your holopad? The predators are hunting me.”

I rounded the street bend, and almost jumped out of my skin. A group of Venlil were huddled around a scruffy Gaian; the predator was moving its dexterous fingers along a fretboard. The taut strings curved to its will, and passion simmered in its eyes. It was seated atop an amplifier, which was capturing its input. The beast hit a few high-pitched notes with its clawless digits, before dropping back to chords.

The human leaned in to the microphone, and released an in-tune bellow in its language. The words translated as an impassioned declaration of belief and emotion. It was belting out notes well above its standard intonation too.

I was too dumbfounded by the predator’s emotional howl to panic. The electric tune sounded pleasant, and its growling voice was surprisingly melodic. Not to mention the hopeful message of the words. If it was going to write music, shouldn’t the song be a rage-filled exaltation of war? This sounded like Venlil radio fodder.

It was apparent there was no getting away from these monsters in the city. Overwhelmed to my core, I set off in search of public transit. What I wanted was time with my family, before Noah and Sara recaptured me. I had to get out of here, and get to my home prior to the humans.

Chapter 83

Memory transcription subject:*Glim, Venlil Rescue*

Date [standardized human time]: November 29, 2136

Public transit on Venlil Prime was always behind schedule, and this tram station was no exception. I was stuck waiting for the next ride out. It was wonderful to see so many people walking around, in a bustling environment. There was still life in their eyes, hope that the humans hadn't quenched yet.

Part of me wished I didn't know the truth of the "Gaians." Would they ever have told us their identity at all? Happiness wasn't the worst thing to dupe myself into believing. It killed me to know that another predator species existed, one that was more warlike than the Arxur…

We were all doomed to a life of servitude and torment; no amount of rumination would fix that. Many cattle grew resigned to that reality, after dealing with the Arxur on a daily basis. But the exterminator in me craved a way to turn the tables. Colonies we landed on had infestations that were out of control too; so much that we mixed orbital actions with paws-on-the-ground. Could I accept that our home was beyond cleansing?

My thoughts wandered to Haysi, and whether her well-being was intact after my escape. When I was crawling up into the airduct, her shrill scream had permeated the vicinity. It wasn't clear what the Gaians had done, to elicit such a fear response. Perhaps they dropped their 'mask-wearing herbivore' routine.

Forget Haysi now, I decided. *You need to monitor every predator in the area.*

My cursory head-count was five humans, though I was rechecking the area every minute. It was a matter of time before a predator singled me out; I was sorry-looking and isolated from the herd. Few other Venlil paid any mind to the Gaians, and no signs of stampede behavior emerged. I hoped this train arrived soon.

There was a breath of sanity in my surroundings, as I noticed a mother with three kids carve a wide berth around a human. The predator was entranced with its holopad, and didn't even look up at the delicacies. I could picture it flashing its teeth as the pups

screamed, and using its meaty paws to crush their fragile bones.

“Excuse me, mind if I sit here?” a chirpy voice asked.

A royal-blue Krakotl was eyeing my bench seat, and I flicked my tail in a ‘Go ahead’ gesture. My eyes never left the nearest human, who was talking animatedly into a device. The avian ruffled her feathers, before following my gaze toward the predator. A strange emotion swirled in her pupils, almost like sorrow.

The bird sighed. “Still afraid of humans, are you? I’m nervous to approach them myself. I was born on Venlil Prime, but I feel like they’d blame me for…you know.”

I measured my response. “I’ve been gone for a long time, and, er, w-woke up in the hospital yesterday. I don’t know why the predators are here. Everyone gets mad at me for acting *normal* toward them.”

“Oh dear. That’s not good. So you got into an accident before Noah and Sara showed up?”

My eyes widened with alarm, as I recognized the names of my slavemasters. Their concealing masks were etched into my memory. Noah’s boasts about the human ability to ‘manufacture anything’ stuck with me too. Those were not the words of a species that had moral qualms over bargaining with the Arxur.

“C-come again. Those names. Who are Noah and Sara?” I squeaked.

The Krakotl tilted her head. “The two astronauts piloting humanity’s first FTL ship. Everyone was hiding in bunkers for hours when they showed up. But they came in peace, my friend. Noah and Sara bent over backwards to prove they were harmless.”

“They are *not* harmless! I know t-this Noah and Sara…and Tarva, personally.”

“What?! No, you don’t. This isn’t a funny joke, man, and I don’t appreciate—”

“S-sorry. I’m not messing with you, I swear…please, I need the truth. I just, um…have a head injury? Maybe I’m misremembering.”

The avian squinted, scrutinizing me for several seconds. I didn’t back away from her direct stare, and tucked my ears back in a pleading gesture. This Krakotl had to understand sincerity, when it was plastered all over my features. None of her explanation made sense, but I had to hear this fabrication for myself.

Unless the names were an uncanny coincidence, Noah and Sara were the first to scout our home as their hunting ground. Could any Venlil actually believe a predator came in peace? My firsthand experience was ripe with displays of aggression; I could still hear the Arxur calling us animals.

My neck brand tingled, as I remembered them pressing a rod to my throat. Their eyes sparkled at my screams, but it was too hot to quiet myself. It felt like they were injecting molten lava into my skin. The restraints stopped me from thrashing, as an Arxur licked the newly-charred skin for fun.

“Please stop lying,” I pleaded, in a broken voice. “I heard the television, t-talking about war with the Federation. I know humans conquered us.”

The Krakotl squawked with alarm. “The Venlil are the closest allies humanity has! Humans adore you; just look around. That war started because the Federation has been gene-modding dozens of species, without their consent. Anyone who doesn’t fit their mold of a model herbivore gets ‘cured.’”

“I beg your pardon? That’s a total falsification. Humans lie, if that’s your source; I would know.”

“The Kolshian chief admitted it from the Federation summit, buddy. Also, my species spearheaded an orbital raid on the human homeworld, unprovoked. Killed a billion civilians, and that’s why they have so many refugees still here. It makes me ashamed to be a Krakotl.”

Of course the Federation tried to exterminate those monsters. Good for them, I thought. *But what’s with this genetic tampering?*

The light-rail train coasted into the station, and an automated voice announced that passengers should begin boarding. The Krakotl hopped off of the bench, leaving me to march after her. There was no telling how much of this story, if any, was true. However, she believed it with all of her heart. That meant the predators might’ve sold these falsehoods to the Venlil too.

I jostled the avian’s wing. “Hey, wait up! How many Venlil…d-do you think they’ve eaten so far?”

“Zero,” she replied, settling into a window seat. “Humans don’t eat sapients, and they see you as part of their pack.”

“You’re really trying to say it’s zero? I *know* it’s a non-zero number. Has the whole world gone mad?”

“Yes, I guess it has. That’s enough questions. I don’t want the humans to think I’m one of *those* Krakotl…they probably do already.”

My gaze turned to the train cabin, as two ‘Gaians’ boarded together. Silent curses echoed through my mind, at the thought of having to ride with them. There was safety in numbers, since we had enough Venlil to form a herd. Still, I was hoping none of the predators would tag along for our voyage. It made me queasy to picture them ravaging the tram.

One human gazed directly at our seat for a long moment. My heart leapt further into my throat, before I realized that its pupils were on my Krakotl seatmate instead. The shaven beast seemed to be testing the bird, as it arched the hair over its nasty eyes. My avian partner raised a wing slightly, and lowered her head to appease the Gaians.

The Krakotl Alliance attacking the predators’ birthplace must have a shred of truth to it. That destructive event explained the ubiquitous invasion of our home; Gaians had been forced to flee their lair. It also meant humans weren’t as strong as Noah claimed. There was hope for the Federation to put them down yet.

Attention please. This line is now departing for Tonalu City. Enjoy a safe ride, and please come back soon!

The train doors started to seal, and I relaxed a bit. That was before I caught the blur of motion in my periphery, as a panicked human chased the tram. At first, I assigned menial lateness to the beast’s actions. Its brown eyes simmered with determination, and it flailed its arms at the conductor.

“STOP THE TRAIN!” the Gaian roared. “WE NEED TO SEARCH YOU!”

The Krakotl beside me gasped. “Sweet Ina…ah, not supposed to say that anymore. That’s Ambassador Noah!”

Excited chatter circulated through the train, and several Venlil flung themselves against the windows to film the incident. You would think it was a superstar celebrity, not an alien hunter. Noah’s lean torso made its pose intimidating, and its thin scalp gave it a hardened look. Its forward-facing irises popped against their white

backdrop.

I could picture it speaking in a falsetto voice, as it squeezed my paw. That was the vicious face it had been hiding. Governor Tarva plodded up calmly beside it, with a curly-haired human next to her. The female 'Gaian' had thick eyebrows, which accentuated her wildness. Her mane was a total catastrophe, puffing out like windblown grass.

We apologize for this delay. Please remain seated as we speak with the Terran ambassador.

"No!" I screamed. "K-keep going!"

My avian seatmate flexed her talons. "You're crying. What's wrong?"

"I wanna see my family! I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE!"

Governor Tarva heard my commotion, and pointed toward the source with her metal tail. Noah waved at the conductor, as the reopened doors granted it entry. It prowled down the aisle, searching with singular intent. I leaned back against the Krakotl in terror, shaking from head to toe. This was like being captured by the Arxur all over again.

My team had descended a canyon, cleaning up native predators there. The region could become an abscess for a fledgling colony otherwise. It was supposed to be a simple job, but none of us realized we weren't alone. The Arxur snuck a ship in under nightfall, and landed practically atop my unit. We all knew it was better to die than to be captured.

I scrambled to the truck to get my firearm, along with every Venlil that didn't freeze. The grays were faster, covering ground with animalistic fervor. A tranquilizer dart embedded in my neck, pricking into my flesh. Sheer terror washed over me, because I knew what the darkness entailed.

"Glim! Tarva heard your voice." The male Gaian worked its way down the aisle, and turned its head from side-to-side. "We're all worried about you. Let us help you."

I glared at Noah's lumbering form. "T-this time, I'll get it right. D-death before c-capture."

I climbed over a number of seats, whacking disgruntled passengers

with my tail. Noah spotted my haphazard escape, and chased after me. The human asked for passengers to intervene. Nearby Venlil didn't hesitate to attempt a takedown.

Two of my own people grabbed at me, as I made it to the emergency hatch. My hindlegs kicked one assailant in the teeth, and I shook off the other with a sudden tug. My claws slid under the lever, pulling the panel open. I dove out the window like I was trying to land on my stomach.

The bulky predator took one look at the gap, before settling for the rear exit. My belly flop knocked the wind out of me, but adrenaline pushed me upright. I sprinted with all of my energy, heading in the opposite direction from Noah. Holopads captured my flight in real time.

"GLIM! Our eyes are…arboreal!" the Gaian panted. "Helps… judge…branch distances!"

The predator sounded out of breath, which meant it might give up the pursuit soon. I ignored its words, and hoisted myself up a flight of stairs. The human was quick despite its size, able to track me excellently. Tree-dwellers wouldn't have such a knack for land pursuit, or such wide pupils.

Why is it still trying to lie? All it does is lie!

Noah crested the stairs on my tail. "And the canines…aren't…for meat eating! They're for fighting over mates."

"That's better?" I screamed.

"To you, yes! They've shrunk, from our ancestors…we don't even do the mate-fighting bit now. Uh, not the biting part."

I shoved my way by startled pedestrians, and Noah apologized as it followed. Several Venlil stared at the human chasing a rescue; we were creating quite a spectacle. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I saw sweat beads on its skin. The burning of its legs affected it less than me, though.

The predator was close on my heels, and outrunning it seemed a physical impossibility. I waited until right when its shadow dropped to a lunging stance, before doubling back. Noah tripped over itself, as I slithered between its lanky legs. The alien found its footing, and reversed its direction.

I'd managed to put a few paces between us again, but I hadn't figured out my final act of defiance. Glim was not a number; Noah had been right, ironically. It wasn't worth living as a monster's cattle in a new place. I hopped onto the stair railing, and slid down. Gravity deposited me back in the terminal.

The human didn't risk the quick descent, when the banister wasn't meant to hold its weight. It was skipping steps all the same, bounding down three at a time. Acid seared through my leg muscles, but I willed myself onward. That tireless *thing* hit the ground at blinding speed too.

"I wanted to tell you…about us!" Noah called. "You deserve to feel safe."

Its footsteps pounded against the concrete, and I bolted behind the stopped train's caboose. Several passengers shouted pleas and exclamations. The Krakotl I'd been talking to tried to swoop down on me, but failed to catch an air current. Tarva and Sara simply watched the madness unfold with agape expressions.

I mounted another platform, as the rumble of an incoming train greeted my ears. The vehicle's front side was visible, and I hoped that its weight would render me dead on impact. My legs stumbled, but I forced a few more steps out of them. Noah's shadow stretched over me again; I could hear its ragged pants.

Turning into the train's motion, I flung myself forward with desperate finality. My body hurtled headlong into a collision; we all knew being captured was the worse option. The human gasped in horror, and made a lunging dive with outstretched arms. It didn't want its meal to get pulverized.

Thin fingers dug into my scruff, twisting into the soft flesh. Noah skidded on its knees, and contorted its body to tug me back. Its arm was nearly wrested from the socket, but it retained its grip. My forward momentum came to an abrupt halt, and I landed with my snout inches shy of the passing tram.

Tears streamed down my face, and I slumped my head in defeat. My body flailed weakly, but Noah had no difficulty restraining me. It was a superior creature in size and strength. I yipped in panic, swinging my claws at its face. The human shrugged off my frenzied blow, which barely nicked its skin.

“Easy, easy! You’re safe now, I told you.” Noah’s nimble digits began kneading my scruff, and it gently brought me against its chest. “We wanted to tell you everything slowly. This is my fault, and I’m sorry.”

I could feel its heart hammering, and the erratic rise and fall of its chest. The predator refused to let go, as it took a moment to catch its breath. Tarva and Sara hurried over, which caused its lips to curve up. It lifted its catch to show them; I fell limp in its arms with hopelessness. The female human passed a holopad to her counterpart, while the Venlil leader gawked.

“Noah! Are you okay?” the Venlil Governor asked, with a concerned head-tilt.

Noah nodded. “Yeah. I’ve got Glim from here; we need a road trip. Maybe you guys could take care of Haysi?”

“Of course. Her reaction left a lot to be desired,” Sara muttered.

My muscles quivered with fear, as every rumble of the predator’s chest rippled into my body. Noah strolled over to the help desk, earning open stares from several Venlil. Its sinewy arms were unwavering, though it hadn’t hurt me yet. I was trapped in its clutches, and I knew its ‘road trip’ was to a slaughterhouse.

Noah poked my neck with its nails. “Brighten up, Glim! Looks like the train to Celgel Falls arrives any minute. You were getting on the wrong one.”

I was speechless, but my chest shook with a despairing sob. The human stared with its binocular pupils, and its eyebrows pressed together. It wasn’t clear why the predator kept trying to engage me. Both of us knew the truth of this encounter.

“Your Aunt Thima moved to Celgel a year ago, according to our records. You want to see her, right?” Noah pressed.

My ears perked slightly. “T-t-t…th…Thima?”

“Yeah! A nice family reunion. I’m going to tag along to make sure you don’t hurt yourself, any other Venlil, or some poor Gaian out for a stroll.”

“H-human. N-not…Gaian.”

“No, Gaian wasn’t a lie. We have lots of names, Glim: Terran, human, Earthling, mankind, and Gaian. Gaian is just one of the

lesser-known ones. Call us whatever you like…not predator, I hope."

The predator delicately extended my wrist, and pressed the holopad it obtained from Sara against my claws. When I didn't snatch the device away, Noah physically bent my toes around it. The Terran released its own grip on the electronic, after checking for several seconds that I wouldn't drop it.

"It's yours. Examine the facts for yourself," the beast growled. "First contact, the peer-reviewed human empathy tests, my speech to the Federation, and our rescue of the cradle from the Arxur. That's where I'd ask you to start."

I eyed the device. "W-what?"

"You can see everything about us: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Our modern culture, our evolution and aggression, the extent of the Federation's lies, how we grow meat in lab vats rather than hunting. Some of it might shock or scare you, but it's all the truth."

"M-monster. P-predator."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Listen, after you spend awhile with your family, I'm taking you back to the facility."

"NO! NOT C-CATTLE!"

The Venlil screaming at the top of his lungs attracted more attention, and Noah blinked in frustration. I could sense the predator's patience waning, so I hushed myself to avoid its ire. Perhaps these lies were kinder than the Arxur's torment and degradation. Humans were different in that regard.

The alien beast heaved a sigh. "You need treatment. But if you never want to see a human again, just say so once we get back. You will never hear from me or any Terran volunteers again; not inside those walls."

"I…w-want…never," I croaked.

"Okay. It's your choice. I'm just asking you to research honestly first. You can lock in your decision when we're back, and ask me anything you like on the ride."

Noah boarded the arriving train with caution, while I was still trapped in its arms. The holopad beckoned to me, as a hint of curiosity crept in. The words 'human empathy' typed themselves,

without conscious effort. It was an absurd notion, but I was interested to discover what supposed evidence existed.

Playing along with the Gaians' game was harmless. A predator's kindness couldn't be that convincing, after all.

Chapter 84

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: November 30, 2136

My shuttle descended on our spy station, piloted by automatic landing functions. This was the same clandestine facility that Secretary-General Meier approached prior to Earth's attack. Perhaps the Dominion should've relocated the outpost, but the brass scoffed at the notion that any prey would dare to strike it. I knew that the Terrans wouldn't hesitate to hit us where it hurt, though, should we ever clash.

Stations like this one were essential to sectorwide command and intelligence. The rig had its own state-of-the-art FTL comms network, which had been painstakingly routed back to Wriss. The relay functioned across hundreds of light-years, by leeching off Federation infrastructure as well. I was careful not to tip my claw when I communicated with the humans; I trusted them to watch their own self-interest foremost.

The Federation don't bother establishing costly networks, because it's the first thing we wipe out. I don't need to give the humans vulnerable targets.

The shuttle dropped onto a landing pedestal; I wasted no time disembarking. Ceremonial armor clung to my form, and a decorative sword had been placed in a scabbard. It was time to act out Isif the fanatic. Some low-ranking grunt had refused her Gojid rations, and then ejected the food out an airlock. The Dominion wished to make an example of her.

Guards bared their teeth as I strutted into a central holding area. The prisoner was dangling from wrist-restraints, bleeding from several gashes. It could be my head on a pike, just as easily; there was reason I treaded with such care. Those ungrateful humans, who reclaimed the very worlds they told us to attack, were making me regret my risks for them. Earth wasn't bargaining from a position of strength.

"Your death will be swift and decisive." I shoved my snout into the inmate's face, and stared right into her pupils. The Arxur guards

watched with amusement. “Live like prey, and die like prey.”

I scanned my form into the virtual interface, and watched as several holograms popped up around me. Chief Hunter Shaza was a welcome attendee, since I needed to stop her from reclaiming Sillis the orbital way. There were plentiful examples of conquest in human history; however, the UN’s lack of slavery and brutality led me to conclude this was different. Terran mercy had gone haywire at the worst time.

The Prophet-Descendant of the Betterment Office, Giznel, was presiding over the trial. I’d branded myself as one of the true believers, and earned his favor among chief hunters. There was a reason I was assigned to the juiciest sector, with weak targets like Venlil and Zurulians. The question was if he suspected my treasonous intent, with how fervently I defended Earth. Human carelessness was jeopardizing my zealous persona.

“Chief Hunter Isif! Raise your condemnation for your empire,” Giznel stated. “Begin when you are ready.”

My pupils scanned the battered prisoner. “What is our birthright, hallowed Prophet? Arxur stand atop the food chain, and the animals populating other worlds exist to suit our whims. The accused mocks our very existence.”

There was no option to show mercy to her. Betterment has eyes and ears everywhere. They’d question me not seeking the death penalty.

“She, whose name has been revoked for treason, disgraces this military. Food is a precious commodity, due to the Federation’s butchery of our cattle,” I continued. “What right does a lowly underling have to dispose of food in an airlock? Food which could’ve fed a worthy mouth!”

I narrowed my eyes, slapping my tail across her snout. Hardened gray skin was pierced by my scales, which added to her array of marks. The Arxur restrained her yelps, as she knew such weakness would lessen slim hopes of Betterment sparing her. Not that there was any chance the Prophet-Descendant would forgive a capital offense.

Giznel yawned in boredom. “The punishment you seek, meritorious Isif?”

“Death! None who oppose the Arxur shall stand,” I snarled. “I wish

to strike this thief down with my own claws, here and now."

"Very well. I concur with the Chief Hunter's assessment. Accused, any last words for your honor?"

The prisoner released a wet cough. "The Gojids are people…true sapients. They ate meat like us. How can you still treat them as cattle?"

"I'll defer that question to you, Isif," the Prophet-Descendant chuckled.

Sapient consumption was a requisite for our survival; I'd come to terms with that years ago. Sure, the Gojid jerky I'd eaten with my crew hadn't gone down as easily, with the thought of Nulia calling me Siffy. Food that didn't emit playful giggles, and wasn't capable of higher reasoning was preferable. Still, there was nothing I could do about our current practices. My actions saved a lot more prey than one sliced-and-diced Gojid.

My tail lashed in faux irritation. "The entire ideal of Betterment is that the strong cull the weak. The prey are still prey based on their actions; how they snivel, and piss themselves over any challenge. These are not the behaviors of true sapients! Even if they once were cogent, that bears no relevance on today."

"Well said. Go ahead; split that traitor's throat," Giznel said.

I stalked around the prisoner, arching the ridges on my spine. Fear glistened in her eyes, which caused my adrenaline to hum. It felt good to be in control, and to have a release for my pent-up aggression. Of course, I didn't really want to complete this execution, but my primal side liked it.

The humans and the Venlil would label me a monster, if they witnessed me strike a prisoner down in cold blood. They didn't understand the confines of my system. The chatty Terrans had entire rituals with lawyers, and testimonies that could drag on for weeks. Here, Betterment's determination was the difference between innocence and guilt; made without a word edgewise.

Chief Hunter Shaza curled her lip. "I don't see any blood. What are you waiting for?"

"Can a man not savor his kill anymore? I was hoping she'd beg," I growled coldly.

My claws slashed across the soft flesh, and scarlet blood spurted between my digits. The Arxur prisoner sagged in her restraints, with gurgling noises escaping her maw. Fluid frothed up to her teeth, and her eyes lolled. The truth was, this wasn't the first, the tenth, or even the hundredth person I'd killed in the name of survival. It got easier every time; the sympathy I felt became muted.

As a cruelty-deficient individual, I learned to fake dominant traits from a young age. A televised execution was when I realized that most people didn't wince at screaming cattle, or cry when their family members died. *That voice* was always there, no matter how much logic I employed. Watching the humans glamorize kind acts, I wondered what Arxur society was like when empathy abounded.

Maybe it could've been the Venlil buddying up to us. Though, ones like Slanek are too emotional for even my liking.

"They die too quickly." I turned to face the holograms, waving my bloodstained claws. "Shaza, I bring word from the humans."

The female Chief Hunter grinned. "How can you be so right about the Gojids being weak, yet you fail to apply that to the humans?"

"Humans are not sniveling prey. They are destructive and prideful, to their own detriment at times. Don't let their pudgy appearance fool you. They bested us in combat, unlike any other race."

"Their prey-like interactions with each other sicken me."

"You are mistaking prey-like for social. Empathy is not a defect in pack predators, though humans must learn to temper such tendencies. Still, they are apex predators on their world."

Giznel narrowed his eyes. "Humans understand cruelty and aggression. They need the same push Betterment gave us."

The Terrans had figures much like our Laznel in their history; I'd done research on a holopad I found in New York's wreckage. Every herbivore alien questioned how such a leader could rise, but the primates already knew that answer. Their modern populace feared that becoming a reality again. Presently, humanity demonized 'predatory' attitudes; they detested an equivalent to the Northwest Bloc resurfacing.

Imposing Betterment on the Terrans was an awful idea, but I wasn't going to voice that opinion. Perhaps in the future, Earth would take in defective Arxur as refugees. The Dominion sentenced anyone

lesser to death, so they might be amenable to lending ‘slaves’ to Earth. It wasn’t like Wriss had a use for condemned weaklings.

Would humanity even want my people on their world? Some UN personnel looked at us like we were diseased animals. Secretary-General Meier wouldn’t have taken much convincing, but alien goals weren’t on Zhao’s agenda. Every action had to lend a direct benefit to Earth, or advance their war efforts. I yearned for the original leader and his calming ideology.

Chief Hunter Shaza scowled. “This human message better be good, Isif. Why did they claim two territories under Arxur siege?”

“The United Nations sees conquest as a way to obtain the entire planet as our catch,” I responded. “They believe in maximizing resources, and are willing to negotiate a deal. Human interference was meant as aid.”

“Aid? Terran commanders messaged my ships, demanding that we back off. Their claim of Sillis, then Fahl, was a bold-faced attempt to swipe our prize!”

“I agree with Shaza. Humans are proving ungrateful, despite how Isif saved their Earth.” Giznel’s fangs protruded with disdain. “We attacked these worlds to enact their vengeance, while their own military floundered. We shouldn’t negotiate for what is ours already.”

“Of course, Your Savageness. Humanity were tactless,” I agreed hastily. “Going orbital on their army seems unwise though. Predators *must* stay united, until the Federation is eradicated.”

Shaza snorted. “Ah, yes. The Federation that humanity is pulling their alliance members from?”

“Pets. Not allies. If you’re tricked by lies tailored for prey…”

The female Arxur stiffened with indignation, and her holographic tail blurred with motion. The Prophet-Descendant scrutinized us both closely, spending an extra second on me. Perhaps I’d painted myself too much in Earth’s camp. A proper Chief Hunter should want to bash the humans’ nose in; humility wouldn’t be the worst thing to teach them, regardless.

“I want Fahl and Sillis in our control, by the end of the week. I don’t care how you do it, Shaza. You and Isif settle that part among yourselves,” Giznel decided.

Shaza's eyes gleamed with triumph. "Yes, Great One. As you wish."

"It will be settled. I am fully committed to our glory," I managed.

The Chief Hunter tossed her head in gloating, as Giznel left the holopad call. The prisoner body sat at my feet throughout this exchange, which I hope bolstered my tough exterior. Shaza had near-full autonomy over her sector, except for the rare case of Betterment's direct orders. People of our rank merely filed reports, and had thousands of ships to do their bidding.

Human generals were chained by comparison, with more oversight and rules to adhere to. I understood what they meant by war crimes now, though I couldn't believe my eyes. What value was artwork in the middle of combat?! Why wouldn't an army take out medics that were limiting enemy casualties? It was a miracle that Zhao hadn't elected to shed this softness.

But I suppose their docility was why I believed they could pioneer a better future. Perhaps I could take another crack at the United Nations, or persuade Shaza of their value to our cause. Pride was important to an Arxur's culture, especially given how concessions would be framed. The long-term value of social allies needed to be put in a way a brute could understand.

"Hear me out, Shaza. I will explain to you why tolerating humans benefits our cause, despite their irritating emotions," I growled. "Every good hunter should have the facts before drafting a plan."

The Chief Hunter swished her tail. "I've had enough talking for today. There's only so much social blabbering one can take."

"Of course, this discourse has dragged on too long. My patience is also tested," I lied. "Opposing opinions are grating, and solitude would be welcome. Just one more thing."

"What is it?"

"We need to have this conversation, in person. Your attack may be detrimental to the Dominion's long-term success. Allow me to present the military pros and cons, at a location of your choice. The decision will be yours."

Shaza presented her fangs in a warning gesture, though the details were grainy in the hologram. I responded by dropping into a hunting crouch; cowing before a threat was admitting defeat. The humans were the only way I saw the war ending, and leaving us

with a non-sapient meat supply. As idiotic as the leaf-lickers could be, I couldn't allow our tensions to escalate.

"I respect an elderly…I mean, veteran general enough to entertain your speech." A snicker shook her sides. "Stop by the cloaked farm habitat just inside my sector; it's a day's travel from your post. You can have a tour of a modern operation."

"Age means surviving combat and nature's assassination attempts. If you're lucky, it will come to you as well," I replied.

"Enough of your platitudes. Will you travel to the farm or not?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

Chief Hunter Shaza terminated the call, and I stormed back to my shuttle. Tolerating her condescending attitude, and groveling on the humans' behalf wasn't a thrilling prospect. I couldn't even wash the death from my body. Cleaning the blood off my claws would suggest that I wasn't proud of my kill.

A day of warp travel would allow me to process options, and play out various scenarios in my mind. Why couldn't the humans just let two species who assaulted them perish? It would be much easier for all parties involved.

Chapter 85

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 1, 2136

The Earth-borne holopad in my possession was alien hardware; Dominion resources weren't equipped to track it. I made sure the device was well-encrypted, and could pass it off as top-secret research if asked about it. It allowed me to monitor anonymous Arxur forums, where anger and sedition were brewing.

Betterment's grip on Wriss had waned, as word of Federation omnivores circled back home. Many citizens saw other meat-eaters as victims, of the same predator hatred that crippled us. The converts were genuine sapients, distorted by the enemy. Those revelations didn't inspire faith in our diet, nor did the Dominion's inability to reform.

Starvation is a good motivator for unrest. These forums have been safe spots for talks of the food alternatives raised by Terrans' existence.

"The humans are the predators we want to be," I read one comment aloud. "Perhaps our resistance movement could be officially recognized. Their support would lend us legitimacy."

My shuttle was on a landing approach to the farm habitat; I digested the reminder of my purpose quickly. The humans were our hope at changing the status quo, and they were the only aliens who saw us as people. Our carnivory made alliances unobtainable with most of the galaxy. There was a reason our search for true life persisted through the centuries.

As long as we were isolated and starving, individuals like Shaza and Giznel would maintain power. Our plight was how Betterment retained control, stirring up perpetual hatred. The Federation caused our predicament, after all. Draconian measures (as humans would say) were necessary, and lesser individuals hindered our collective welfare.

The holopad was tucked back into a drawer, as docking protocols were completed. I disembarked to the hangar bay, and Chief Hunter Shaza greeted me. The fattened guards flanking her were indicative of our cattle-rich location. Farms were coveted postings, awarded

based on bloodlines. This cushy detail was one reserved for those whose genes were desirable.

“Shaza! You look absolutely vicious,” I barked.

The Chief Hunter narrowed her eyes. “Don’t get flirtatious, Isif. This is a professional visit.”

“I merely respect a worthy adversary. The feeling is mutual, yes?”

“Indeed, I suppose we can spare a minute for pleasantries. A tour is…mandatory, for another sector’s lead hunter. Cattle farms are a delight.”

“Nothing like a satisfactory meal at the ready. Shall we proceed?”

The female Arxur stalked forward, her torso positioned at a sharp angle. I mimicked her lunging posture, and ensured that my “elderly” pace kept up with hers. This farm habitat was the pride of Shaza’s sector, with its compact design. Rather than the traditional pens with overhead guard walkways, her design utilized crawlspace trapdoors for retrieval. Arxur could monitor prey from viewing panes, and administer negative feedback with a button array.

The hangar spilled into a narrow hallway, with cattle pens visible on both sides. The enclosure to my left housed Harchen, who were in poor condition. I could see flaky scales peeling off their hides, and their sunken eyes in a listless daze. These reptiles were lethargic, having lost the will to move around. It was pitiful to see a sapient mind reduced to a husk.

Harchen territory was the closest to this facility, but that didn’t stop Shaza from ferrying in other livestock. To the right, I could see the newest species in her domain, the Yotul; exotic by all accounts. The smooth-skulled marsupials showed a bit of life, though I saw glassiness in their eyes. These uplifts played no part in what happened to our people, and supposedly hadn’t latched onto the fear ideology yet.

I worked with the marsupials on Earth, so I knew they sided with humans because they felt ostracized. Active hostilities between the Arxur and friendly prey were unnecessary. There was a truce ongoing since the Battle of Earth, extended to the three species that offered aid. However, unlike the Zurulians and Venlil, the Yotul weren’t in my domain. I couldn’t stop Shaza from renouncing my pact.

Most Chief Hunters are accepting any human allies as Arxur allies, despite Betterment's official silence. But Shaza sees no reason not to round up primitive herbivores.

I forced a look of disinterest. "How do the Yotul taste? They don't look like anything special."

"The taste is quite strong…stays in your mouth for awhile. Dry too," Shaza replied. "The flavor profile is not my favorite, but some of the guards like it."

"I'm sure the underlings have simpler palates than us."

"Isif, the masses will eat what they're given. The important thing is how well the Yotul breed. Our herd here will gather data to determine their viability."

"It's hard to match Sivkits or Zurulians."

"Or the Venlil? How could you give them up?"

"Calculated risk."

Skepticism flared in her amber eyes, but the Chief Hunter continued our walk in silence. I kept my gaze ahead, not wanting to look at the cramped Yotul pen. That defective voice was restless after interacting with the helpers on Earth. I was relieved there hadn't been any "gracious" offers to sample the product.

My mind was elsewhere as Shaza guided me through the guard quarters, a Krakotl aviary, and two more Harchen pens. If this was the crowning achievement of Arxur society, what scathing commentary did that drum up about our people? Billions of sapients were in similar misery, and cognizant of their continued suffering. It was a fate deserved by no one.

The Chief Hunter led me into the kitchen facilities, where corpses dangled from the ceiling. The scent of a gutted Harchen struck my nostrils, an aroma that tickled my olfactory glands. My body was conditioned to associate certain blood types with meals. Saliva production and eye dilation were involuntary responses; I could hear my stomach rumbling, despite being well-fed.

How did humans suppress intrusive instincts without any discomfort? I wasn't an animal, of course; I wasn't going to strike down an herbivore just because they were bleeding. That didn't mean my nostrils wouldn't have their interest piqued. However, on

Earth's internet, the impulses they discussed toward the prey had… nothing to do with sudden hunger.

"So our second-to-last stop. This is where we process food," Shaza narrated. "Is this the part where you get to addressing Fahl and Sillis?"

I lashed my tail. "Two territories which belong to us. I agree that we should get them back. However, it's in our best interest to attempt loathsome diplomacy for their recovery."

"Why are you so keen on appeasing these weaker predators? They shouldn't get away with blatant insults."

"Ha…at least humans aren't so dreadfully boring, yes? They did offer compensation for their overreach. They see our raids as wasteful of resources, and view this as a chance to build a decadent empire."

"I don't want their leftovers, Isif. I want them to get out of the fucking way!"

Shaza exhaled a frustrated breath, and sank her serrated fangs into her lower maw. The hostility in her gaze suggested a different approach was required; this was about personal pride more than resources. This sector's Chief Hunter didn't care if humans could supply more goods than us. No percentage of the haul would be sufficient to allow their incursion.

Humans bossing us around and calling the shots exacerbated the situation. They're lucky they didn't get nuked then and there.

"You ask why I tolerate such things, Shaza," I sighed. "The truth is, I want to keep Earth's guns pointed at the Federation. I'm using humans to make the Dominion the supreme, unchallenged power."

"Using humans? I was under the impression they're using you."

"The UN are clueless to our aims, because Zhao is blind and on the warpath. Earth's silly coddling is causing the prey to collapse! Meanwhile, their manpower performs the heavy lifting against the main Federation factions."

"Their *manpower*, riddled with lesser creatures. Even their own ships are tribute from the Venlil; the weak, sniveling knock-kneed prey. Humans are bungling everything."

"Nothing is bungled. They'll do anything for victory, and pitting the

animals against each other…it's brilliant. Our enemies will be destroyed without us lifting a claw."

"You're saying you *really* want to use them to fight the war for us?"

"Precisely. Our victory has been delayed for long enough; for centuries. What are Fahl and Sillis compared to bringing down the entire house?"

"We don't need humans to destroy the Federation though. We aren't weak. We aren't dependent on others."

"It's not that we cannot do it ourselves. It's about preserving our strength for a worthy adversary; the Federation doesn't contain enjoyable foes. Let someone else take out the trash."

Shaza issued a low chuckle, and stalked past an icebox of Krakotl carcasses. Fresh prey was preferrable, but not always possible during military operations. It was inefficient to build cattle enclosures into every warship and garrison. Larger ships could accommodate active livestock, but this facility was suited to ration exportation too.

I could see that my words caused the Chief Hunter to reconsider her strategy. The humans could be framed as efficient soldier-slaves, who didn't require oversight. At worst, the Terran advance softened Federation defenses, and pulled species away from the enemy coalition. As purely a numbers game, the tactical benefit was obvious.

My nose distracted me again, as we wandered into a hangar beside the butchery. Adjustable tunnels of barbed wire sat beside docking ports, built to load or unload cattle. This must be the shipping department, where any new catch was processed. It also provided a way to ship living prey out to the fleet, for fresh consumption.

Shaza cleared her throat. "Your idea is clever, but humans can't believe they have authority over us. Their soldiers need a kick in the teeth. It's unbecoming of an Arxur commander to surrender territory, without a fight!"

"If dignity's worth more than our overall success, then your mind is set." My pupils darted over to a barbed wire enclosure, where the tangy aroma originated. Zurulians were crammed into the unloading area, mewling pitifully. "Wait. Why do you have prey from my sector?!"

“Relax, Isif. Some idiot volunteers went speeding off on a medical ship to rescue Krakotl civilians. We intercepted them, and brought them here.”

Shaza shouldn’t be capturing human-allied species at all! This jeopardizes everything I worked on; the UN are pressing for me to barter these guys’ release as well.

Thoughts of Zurulian medics in New York ran through my mind. There was a unique earnestness in their efforts to save human patients. The little furballs were dedicated to preserving life, even those of people they believed were monsters. What other species would fly unarmed medical ships into an Arxur occupation?

Emotional concerns warred with my logic. I knew that my only objective should be talking Shaza down, but I felt sick to my stomach. Despite how good their scent was, my defective voice couldn’t bear to see friendlies shipped off to slaughter. My interactions made their personhood all too real, not a harsh fact I pushed aside with ease.

One Zurulian was sobbing, with despondent paws pressed against the wire. Her stomach quaked, and green blood was smeared across her little nose. The pleading quality in her eyes paralyzed me; I couldn’t bring myself to ignore the herbivores’ plight. My position gave me leeway to induce a more favorable outcome, so a bartering attempt was logical.

Persuasion wasn’t working on Shaza, anyways. My objectives shifted in a heartbeat, to a species more worthy of salvation than the Tilfish or the Harchen. The humans would have to deal with the war they’d brought upon themselves.

My throat was dry. “I see. Well, on the topic of injured pride, I will not press further on Fahl and Sillis. But I can’t leave this facility without a consolation prize.”

“So you admit defeat? What is it you want from me?” the female Arxur hissed.

“A few of those Zurulians. Humans claim they make great ‘pets’, and I’d like to test that for myself. I’ve been devoid of amusement for too long. I can always carve them up once I’m bored.”

“Tsk tsk. That’s an odd request, though I’d like to see them scrubbing your tail scales. I’ll grant your wish, Isif. Are two prime

specimens sufficient?"

"Three is what I had in mind. Humans keep more at hand, but these will dish out enough whining for one Arxur. Oh, and…I'd like the crying one specifically. It's a prime example of what makes these animals lesser."

The Chief Hunter bared her teeth, and snatched the tear-stained Zurulian with haste. She deposited the quadruped into a scratchy sack, indifferent to any yelps. Tilting her head, she picked out two more prizes: a young, healthy Zurulian of each sex. Shaza dragged the cattle bag across the floor, and whispered for her guards to bring it to my ship.

I breathed a sigh of relief, as I realized the layout subtly brought us back to our starting point. My landing hangar was next to the shipping facility, which allowed for a swift exit. The hosting Arxur were all but rushing me off. Chief Hunter Shaza displayed ostensible irritation, weary of my visit.

My social tolerance was higher than most Arxur's, but this specific company did not suit my tastes. There was no reason to prolong my travels. I offered a tepid farewell, and boarded my craft without delay. The bag of Zurulians had been thrown on the floor, like it was any other junk. The herbivores screamed their heads off, and flopped around inside the sack.

I ignored the parcel, lumbering up to the cockpit. Jetting away from the farm habitat was done with a few buttons, and a course was set for my territory. Unease swelled in my chest, as I realized how rash my snatch-and grab was. What significance did three cattle have in the big picture?

I crouched over the Zurulian package. "What on Wriss am I going to do with these guys? Any normal Arxur will think I'm mad."

My paw reached into the sack, scooping the warm bundles out. The Zurulians wriggled and squeaked at my touch, before bolting away. I watched as they disappeared into crevices and supply closets; the fools didn't realize I could sniff them out with ease. The Terrans must have endless patience to coddle such antics.

"I just saved your lives. I'm not going through a song and dance to prove myself!" I snarled.

Stalking back to the cockpit, my destination switched to Earth. The

humans could deal with these Zurulian ‘pets’, and also learn the consequences of their mercy. The United Nations should be warned of Shaza’s intent. However, flagrant interference would sever my ties to the Dominion; I wasn’t sure I wanted to openly oppose my people.

As much as I longed for societal overhaul, Arxur resistance was in its infancy. A two-front war was a steep task for primitive omnivores. It wasn’t clear whether the empathetic humans could be trusted to pull their weight, or support our cause. Sticking my neck out wasn’t worth it without future rewards.

Perhaps it was best to let Sillis and Fahl slip back into Dominion possession.

Chapter 86

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 1, 2136

Activity quieted down among our fleet, following the resounding victory at Khoa. The UN focused on menial affairs, for now. A small contingent of scout ships detached to survey potential colonies, and a few patrollers ensured the Federation didn't get another crack at the Mazics. Without a fleet of their own, Cupo's Presidium was reliant on human protection.

Most Terran ships circled back to our mobile repair units, which had camped a few light-years from the battleground. Our vessel docked for routine maintenance, but that lasted mere hours. Once the all-clear was given, we were sent with a small group on a patrol route. The United Nations was likely to assign us a new target, after Earth sorted out their next priorities.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea, Sovlin," Samantha said from my side. "Why would Officer Cardona invite you to his quarters?"

I bobbed my shoulders, mirroring a human 'shrug.' "Only one way to find out. The real question is why you ordered Carlos not to accompany us."

"Tyler and Carlos almost came to blows, when he saw what happened to your face. Truly a hard fall."

"Accidents happen."

Carlos had rounded on Tyler in the rec lounge, after I sought out a medical touchup. The blood gushing from my nose wasn't ebbing, and my paper towel hadn't helped. The male guard's biceps rippled beneath their green markings, as he roared at his superior officer. I believe his exact words were, "Does beating up a depressed alien make you feel like a man?!"

Tyler hadn't responded, and tried to ignore my friend. Onso took notice of my facial damage too; there was a tinge of fear, when he looked at his buddy. That wariness was unusual, for the nigh-feral Yotul. He might've decided there was a scrap of truth in humans initiating violence.

Captain Monahan got wind of the incident, as other UN soldiers broke up the altercation. I issued a full denial, when she summoned me to the bridge. My fibs didn't fool her at all, especially when Officer Cardona offered little in his own defense. The commander was obviously frustrated, as she poked holes in my story.

Why did I have wounds all over my body, if I'd slipped headfirst into a cabinet? There had to be another reason I was nursing my ribcage.

Monahan announced her disappointment in Tyler, before assigning him to indefinite latrine duty. Days had passed since his beatdown, but the holopad invite to his quarters came out of nowhere. Perhaps he blamed me for not offering a more robust denial? The blond officer must be angry about receiving punishment for his actions.

Samantha crossed her arms. "Ah, yes, accidents happen. And leave finger marks on your throat?"

"…you can see that through my fur?" I groaned.

"The doctor did at the infirmary."

"Then your doctor exaggerated. You know how you humans are; very over the top."

The female guard huffed in irritation, fixing me with a disdainful glare. Her narrowed eyes once would've filled me with terror, but now, I recognized the scowls as part of her snarky attitude. Her venomous tongue was a defense mechanism, in my opinion; Samantha never offered any commentary on the loss of her husband. Maybe that stoicism was how humans were supposed to grieve, though I didn't believe that.

I tapped my claws against Tyler's door. Several crewmates that passed us in the hall whispered to each other; my identity must've gotten around. According to Samantha, my role in Cilany's interview had earned me some favor on Earth. But I didn't deserve humans' pity, and I was thankful that Officer Cardona dished out retribution at last.

Onso opened the door. "Harris, Sovlin! Come in."

"Not until you tell us why we're here," Samantha hissed.

"Oh, cut it out, Sam…don't be like that!" I swatted her elbow with the blunt side of my claws. "I'm going in, with or without you."

“What, so you can take another accidental tumble?! Get in a nasty fight with a rug?”

Tyler’s angular face peered over a couch. “Hey, we’re all cool; it’s square. Onso and I are playing a badass video game. I thought you’d get a kick out of it, Sovlin.”

Confusion swelled in my chest, as the tall human waved a black object in his hand. Why would Marcel’s packmate invite me over to play some television game? I trudged inside, despite suspecting an ambush. Samantha rolled her eyes; at least I could count on her not intervening in a ‘rug tussle.’

There was no visible malice in Tyler’s blue irises. Onso must’ve been briefed on who I was, since he didn’t question our past anymore. The uplift knew that I’d deserved whatever beating the human doled out, and then some. Guilt clawed at my chest, as I joined the Terran officer on the couch. A trace of fear lingered too, my instinctive phobia of violent predators.

Tyler threw me into those cabinets like I weighed nothing. It was quite terror-inducing.

A menu screen appeared on the television, with the words ‘Start Campaign’ selected by Onso. The Yotul looked awkward juggling the ‘controller’, which was designed for long fingers rather than stubby toes. The uplift used his tail to hold it, and had both paws hovering over a side.

Samantha accepted a device from Tyler, and passed one to me. The female human placed a pillow in my lap, balancing the controller atop it. I tucked my paws on both sides, thankful for my slender claws to poke at buttons. It wasn’t clear how predatory these games were, or if the blond Terran was attempting to traumatize me.

Onso explained the button functions, while a loading screen played. I tried to listen, but I was distracted by his human partner’s posture. Tyler stared ahead with intensity, and leaned forward on the couch. The predator’s knuckles squeezed around his controller, as though he wanted to constrict it.

“What is this?” I asked, unable to stay silent. “I don’t understand why I’m here.”

Tyler blinked. “You can go if you want. This is a first-person shooter game called *The Clash of Proxima*, co-op mode. I modded the human

enemies with Arxur bodies. Thought it'd help you, to gun down the grays like you want."

"What? You know what happened to his kid. You think he wants to play a *game* about the Arxur?!" Samantha spat.

"A game about killing them? Fuck yeah."

I'd been hellbent to get my claws on an Arxur, and extract as much suffering as possible for years. I wanted to look one in the eyes, and relish ending its miserable existence. A simulation was the closest thing I could get to that reality. Tyler was right; that did sound like fun, or at least a cathartic experience.

I bared my teeth. "I like this game already. Especially if the predator bastards scream."

The revelation that the Kolshians deployed their cure against the Arxur did nothing to quell my revenge fantasies. If anyone deserved a slow death, it was a filthy gray beast. Starvation didn't excuse the torture videos of our pups they mailed to Federation worlds…and how they ate my own family alive, bit by bit.

The humans would never dream of such a thing, no matter how dire their circumstances. The necessity of hunting us was something I could see, if a flesh-eater was deprived of their prey. But the level of sadism the Arxur showed had *nothing* to do with necessity. It sickened me that the UN coordinated with them, but I understood that Earth had been surrounded and defenseless.

Samantha heaved an exasperated sigh. "I hope this is the easy difficulty, Tyler. You're just going to annoy him if he dies nonstop."

"Sovlin's gotta learn somehow!" the male predator replied.

The game deposited us outside of a space station, and the graphical rendition was admirable. Tyler and Samantha's characters moved forward at the front, while Onso and I crept after them. Arxur bodies were crouched inside, spewing bullets upon our entry. Rage flowed into my wrists, and I depressed the fire button.

Crimson streaks moved across my split-screen, which I suppose symbolized wounds to a red-blooded Terran. A bar decreased over my character's head. Onso and I were shooting in a daze, while the humans ducked behind cover. It was frightening how sharp their reflexes and multitasking were in combat.

The Terrans did most of the work gunning down the Arxur. It felt satisfying when my own bullets hit one representation, but a part of me was concerned about the lifelike blood splatter. Perhaps the Earthlings did crave death and violence? This shouldn't be an activity of mass appeal.

I decided to attempt a conversational tone. "So human games involve battle recreations…and killing people?"

"It's a power fantasy, obviously," Tyler replied. "Everything is a competition for us. Why not fight in a way that no one gets hurt?"

"But you people *want* to fight, enough to seek it out for fun."

"Not just fighting. We want to win, Sovlin. There's a difference. Doesn't a part of you want to *crush* the Arxur? Vanquish them?"

"The Arxur, yes…but you said these enemies are normally other humans."

"Old habits die hard. We fought wars for thousands of years. It's how we are, man."

"So it feels good, Tyler? To kill your own kind?"

The blond human was silent, pursing his lips with disquiet. A chill ran down my spine, as I noticed Samantha shaking her head at Tyler. That implied that the answer was affirmative, and I could see why she wouldn't want that broadcasted. Our game characters moved ahead, while I wondered how humans controlled such instincts.

Terrans have empathy. I suppose that's the only thing keeping them from the Arxur's lows.

Onso yipped excitedly. "Charging at an enemy feels good. Driving them off, kicking them in the teeth, showing your strength. That's what Tyler means."

"As I've told you before, charging at hostiles with no strategy gets you killed," the human officer sighed. "In both real life and the game."

"Hold up, uplift," I barked. "You'd play a game killing other Yotul?"

The marsupial flicked his ears. "Sure. We defended territorial claims for years. Harsh winters come, and there's not enough grains stashed for everyone. You take, or you're taken from."

“That’s…twisted. You’re an herbivore, fighting among your own people?”

“Competition *is* normal, and you fuckers told us it’s not. Nature is indifferent to any of our morals. The Gojids probably did the same thing, before the tentacled-freaks remade you.”

Onso’s right. We ate meat, so Gojids are fucked-up monsters too. I have no right to judge his people or humanity.

Gunfire sound effects snapped me away from my rumination. More enemies camped in the next area, and the Arxur began pinning us down. My heart rate skyrocketed, as if it was genuine combat. I crouched by a barrel just in time, and retained a few slivers of health. This enemy AI was merciless, an accurate approximation of the real grays.

The Yotul wasn’t so quick to find cover. Onso held down the sprint blocker, and seemed keen to melee the enemies. His health bar was depleted within a second, and his humanoid character crumpled to the ground. The primitive jabbed at several buttons, prompting the avatar to rise.

Onso grew incensed by his death, and ignored Tyler calling his name. The uplift curled his lip, rage smoldering in his eyes. He released an incoherent howl, and flung the controller in a blind fury. A cracking sound reverberated through the air, as the device crashed into a wall.

Tyler paused the game. “What the fuck, Onso? That’s the third controller you’ve thrown!”

“It’s a stupid game!” the Yotul screeched. “These levels are impossible!”

“I think we’re not playing together anymore.”

“What? No! I’m sorry, it’s just so…GAH!”

“You said you’d try harder, buddy. You can’t just break things because you’re mad.”

“Unless it’s Sovlin’s face,” Samantha chimed in helpfully.

“I shouldn’t have done that, but I’m not going to apologize. Marcel is a good dude, and he didn’t deserve a shock collar around his neck. What’s one punch compared to that?”

My spines bristled. “I agree with him, Sam. More people should

treat me like the monster I am. Please, let it go."

Tyler gave me a rough pat on the shoulder; I flinched instinctively. The blond human switched off his console, and took the controller from my grip. It was disappointing not to have another crack at the Arxur. The game should've allowed us to best and trample them with ease; it wasn't fun to strategize.

More importantly, I wasn't sure what Tyler was playing at. The big guy resented me, for a well-established reason. Even Onso should've sided against me, but the exchange duo were acting cordial. This gaming session was crafted as an outlet for my anger. Though, the fact that predators constantly used it for that purpose, was a jarring admission.

I'd begun to think of Terrans as normal people, who weren't a threat to innocents. Perhaps the truth wasn't so simple, despite their rich sentimentality. It was odd to hear a human speaking of their aggression in candid terms. Billions of predators on one world, craving a fight at all times, and trying to hold themselves together…I didn't know how they functioned.

That goes a long way to explaining the Federation's observations. I can see why they find other ways to get that out of their system now.

"Well, let me clean up the controller shards first," Tyler grumbled, "but Onso and I'll head to the mess hall in a few minutes. You're both welcome to join us."

I chewed at my claws. "You should enjoy your meal. I don't want to sour it for you."

"Sovlin, I forgave you. It's all water under the bridge now. You haven't reached out for therapy, so I decided you needed a pal in the interim."

"You…want to befriend me? Why would you do that?"

"Because I think you deserve a second chance. No more knuckle sandwiches from me, promise. You've suffered enough."

Samantha bared her teeth. "Sovlin's down on himself more than ever. Tell him being an omnivore doesn't make him unworthy of happiness."

"Well duh. I don't think I deserve pain and misery, and I'm an omnivore."

The humans missed the point, as usual. Their tenuous grasp on their instincts was something they managed, so that they wouldn't commit heinous deeds. There was no telling what savagery Gojids were capable of; eating corpses was monstrous enough. My predatory side had shown with Marcel's torture, which even Recel likened to the Arxur.

"You're right. I'm glad you guys have my back," I fibbed.

"That's what humans are for! Besides, there might not be a lot of happy days left." Tyler ushered me to the door, wearing a sad smile. "So enjoy the down time while it lasts."

"Uh, hold up. What is that supposed to mean?"

"The brass detected anomalous movement in the Arxur fleet. We're going to shadow their vector. Tail a few light-years behind them, in case they try anything."

"What are you…expecting them to try?"

"We don't know. But our leader had a falling out with them, and they know the UN isn't at full strength. It's possible they'll attack our garrisons on Fahl or Sillis. That's a prelude to war."

The thought of the Terrans squaring off with the Arxur brought me considerable relief. After Cilany's interview, the primates had every reason to stick to the monsters' side. It was miraculous they kept diplomatic avenues open for prey that defected. I mean, according to Tyler, humans weren't content with peace in the best conditions.

Perhaps the same degeneracy runs through the Gojids' contaminated genes. Like Onso said, we might've been similar primitives.

Species like us needed the humans' help with just about every issue. If Earth could get back to exacting aggression on ugly child-eaters, that would inspire my optimism about the galactic future. It would also bring our predators back to the morals their society once cherished. Any indication that the Arxur were an enemy was one I would seize.

Eagerness thrummed in my chest. "So humans will beat the grays. You should have as soon as Earth was clear, just like you did at the cradle."

"It's not so simple. The Arxur have been concealing their full capabilities; our intelligence is blind," Tyler explained. "They have

numbers, technology, and bases across the galaxy. Our prospects in a serious conflict don't look good."

Samantha snorted. "And we're already fighting the vegan cultists, better known as the Federation. Us versus the universe, battle royale."

"Hey, it's not that dire. We have allies. 33 open allies, counting the Thafki and the Gojids."

"We're your friends!" Onso yipped. "Together, we're unlocking the secrets of physics, and kicking ass!"

"Hell yeah, I'm glad someone's ready for trouble. I want to be sure you're fit for duty too, Sovlin."

I flicked my claws threateningly. "I'm fit to fight the Arxur. I'm fit to do a whole lot more than that. Any time, any place."

Tyler shot me a concerned look, while Samantha boasted her signature smirk. The door clicked shut behind us, leaving me to wander toward the mess hall. The predator ship felt cold and empty, like the uncanny stillness at the eye of a cyclone. This could be the last moment of sanity for a lengthy duration.

With greater challenges looming, it was nice to patch up relations with my human superior. In-fighting wasn't a luxury our underdog coalition could afford.

Chapter 87

Memory transcription subject:*Glim, Venlil Rescue*

Date [standardized human time]: December 1, 2136

The half-day train journey kickstarted my confinement with the human. The more time passed, the less I was convinced that we were in Celgel Falls to see Aunt Thima. We stopped off at a hotel for rest, until the Venlil government brought us a car and a driver. It was clear Noah had our authorities at its beck and call.

I was impressed with how well the Gaian could control its instincts, and with how thorough its propaganda was. Reading about secret predators within the Federation was jaw-dropping; that rattled my worldview to the core. It was lunacy for the Kolshians to think flesh-eaters could be tamed! Any credibility the Terrans had gained was their fault.

Human behavior did prove curious, especially rescue footage of the Gojids. That was negated by the fact that they invaded the cradle; Earth was the aggressor in the conflict. A lackluster excuse about Prime Minister Piri staging an assault was their cover for their warmongering. It was an opportunity to conquer the lesser races, and begin an empire.

But as a former exterminator, I couldn't say I didn't feel a sliver of doubt. Gaians broke a lot of rules that I'd known since birth, whether they were lying or not. I hadn't worked up the courage to ask Noah any questions yet. However, there were a lot of answers I wanted to hear, when the beast was forced to cook up spontaneous retorts.

Maybe I'm not in imminent danger of being devoured. Unless we're going to a slaughterhouse.

"…giving Haysi space. She hasn't been eating or drinking, and I think Sara visiting would be a trigger," Tarva was speaking to Noah, through a video call.

The human pursed its lips. "We should give Haysi as much time as she needs. If she's not even voicing her concerns, she's not ready. Glim is trouble, but at least his mind is still there."

"Just be careful, Noah. This isn't the capital; it's a rural area, where

Venlil aren't as open-minded. They don't regularly interact with humans. You're not exactly incognito either."

"Are you worried about me? A *monstrous predator* like me can scare off a few fanatics."

"Please, try not to scare anyone! The footage of you chasing Glim is making the rounds, and let's just say…it's a bad look. 'Human ambassador hunts Venlil cattle in train station.'"

"It wasn't like that! Glim could've hurt someone. I had to stop him."

"I know, Noah. I like to be involved with things myself, but maybe we shouldn't have gotten wrapped up in this at all. We're too high profile to be ordinary helpers."

The Gaian scowled. "It was your idea to sponsor a Venlil in the first place. You said it was good PR to 'do our part.'"

"And you said you wanted to. Does it really matter whose fault it is?" Governor Tarva hissed.

"No. I just don't want your media team to toss me under the bus."

"Stars, I hate all of your idioms. 'Kill two birds with one stone.' 'Cut to the chase.' 'Stabbed in the back.' Are there any that aren't about being maimed or killed?"

"One or two."

"You're infuriating. We'll settle this later. Just be safe, okay?"

Noah bared its teeth to itself, as the Venlil leader abandoned the call. I studied the Gaian for a long moment, and considered the adoration in Tarva's eyes. That emotion looked like love, but I didn't understand how such strong feelings could arise toward a monster. Perhaps I should regard the beast with gendered pronouns, like he was a person.

Earth's presence was less nefarious than Wriss's Dominion, from what I could tell. The empathy tests were convincing, since it was difficult to fool scientists on a neurochemical level. Why had Noah lied to us though? His actions hadn't been innocuous, conning and misleading us.

The Gaian ambassador was ignoring my presence, for now; I was certain he was avoiding direct eye contact. His focus drifted to a sign in the distance, which read 'Celgel Retirement Home.' His hand reached for a visor, and he pressed it across his paralyzing pupils. I

wondered what that accomplished, when every Venlil here knew of his predatory identity.

“W-why do you w-wear your visor out here?” I gasped out.

The human palmed his chin. “Because, these are elderly Venlil. I don’t want to give anyone a heart attack. Any Venlil over 65 weren’t allowed in the exchange program, to avoid cardiac episodes.”

“T-thima…is how old? I don’t know h-how many…years—”

“She’s 74, Glim. You were gone for 11 years.”

“No…that’s not p-possible.”

“I’m sorry. I hate to spring this on you, but your aunt’s memory is fading. She’s in the late stages of dementia.”

My gaze shifted to the rural landscape, which stretched to the horizon opposite the assisted living facility. A family reunion where Thima forgot me hadn’t been in my imaginings. I was saddened that I hadn’t been there to help, and to visit her. Had her mind deteriorated because she was alone?

Noah hesitated, before moving a hand slowly. His fingers hovered over my wrist for several seconds, giving me a chance to pull away. The Gaian empathetically squeezed my forearm, like a Venlil would with their tail; his touch was delicate and frail. It was clear he was leaving the option for me to withdraw, since I knew from the train station that he was much stronger.

There were several things I’d read that weighed on my mind; I couldn’t succumb to believing the narrative. The humans were allies with the child-eating Arxur, even if they’d used that alignment to liberate Venlil captives. Their current objective was unraveling the Federation, and they were bestial hunters too. Apparently, Terran aggression had been documented by observers, prior to first contact.

I can’t remember learning about them in school, other than vaguely as an extinct predator race, I mused. *The internet claims they’ve had over 10,000 battles in their history.*

“H-hundreds of wars in just the century…after your w-world war. The first one,” I whined. “How c-could you ever…k-keep peace?”

Noah was quiet for several seconds. “We have to grow the fuck up.

Humans want peace, yet we've only ever known competition. It doesn't come naturally, but we're starting to act like a united planet."

"V-venlil, always…at peace."

"I doubt that. The Kolshian gentling took hold, and the Farsul sanitized your past. I think you used to be feisty herbivores, until they convinced you of your weakness."

"And…if we're n-not s-strong?"

"We'll teach you. We'll protect you, with a fierceness you've never seen before."

Noah's lips curved up, and I dissociated myself from the rush of fear. Perhaps the constant snarling betrayed his deceit, since the gesture came off as subconscious. The human rushed to cover his mouth, like he knew he'd done something wrong. If threat displays were intuitive, that explained the full-face masks at the hospital.

I recalled how the Arxur would snarl just looking at us, licking their lips with appetite. Sapient predators used their teeth to assert dominance in conversation too, from what I could tell. The guards would flash fangs when contesting a particular catch, or boasting of their hunts. The Gaians possessed the same urges.

The Venlil driver parked the car outside the nursing home, and Noah opened the door. I felt paralyzed, befuddled by the paradoxical humans. It wasn't clear what to think of them. Their motives were ambiguous, and their mannerisms flipped between hostility and sympathy on a dime.

"Smiling, or 'snarling' as you say, is a submissive gesture in primates. I understand it is not so for other animals," Noah sighed.

I coaxed myself out of the car. "N-nonsense. H-how can t-teeth… baring…"

"Be friendly? It's about their position. Teeth apart, jaw tension, and lips curled back; that's actual hostility. But teeth together and lips relaxed shows we're *not* about to attack."

"S-so it's saying you don't want to bite?"

And predators need to communicate that constantly?!

The Gaian ambassador nodded. "Exactly. Venlil don't understand the subtle difference. The few that try to replicate it usually just

look constipated, man."

I chuckled, in spite of myself. "You h-have these…answers well-rehearsed."

"I'm used to explaining everything we do. If I'd explained us better in my speech, a billion people wouldn't have died. Since then, I sifted through our evolution pretty thoroughly."

Noah's voice turned scratchy, and his ensuing cough sounded a bit congested. Did the Gaian consider himself responsible for the extermination attempt? He'd stated Earth's case pretty well, for five minutes broken up by hecklers; guns had been trained on him the whole time too. A non-predator would've frozen in fear.

The fact that he gave anyone pause, over exterminating warlike horrors, is miraculous. Nobody in his position could've done better.

The human pawed at his nose, before opening the door to the lobby. He gagged at once, and muttered something about "disinfectant smell." A middle-aged Venlil sat at a reception desk, startling at our appearance. Her eyes went wide with fear, and her ears pinned back. She snapped out of it enough to tap a notice with her tail.

A sign was taped to the desk, reading "No Humans Permitted" in several scripts. The Gaian crossed his arms, and leaned back with an intimidating frown. I observed the tightness of his jaw and the slant of his eyebrows; this was genuine hostility. It was worryingly easy to decipher the predator's mouth contortions, once told what to look for.

Noah sighed. "See, Glim? Still think we run the show here?"

"I don't know. You put up with a lot," I muttered.

"W-what…you c-can't be here," the Venlil receptionist stammered. "You need to leave! T-the human, anyway."

The Gaian lifted his visor. "I think you'll make an exception for the Terran ambassador. I have powerful friends."

"There's s-security footage! Are you g-going…going to attack us to get t-through? You're trespassing."

"Glim wants to visit his Aunt Thima. Make that happen, and we'll leave."

"N-no. You're *not* welcome here, *Noah.*"

The veins in the Gaian's neck bulged, and his fingers clenched tighter. His lips curled back to his pink gums, while his eyes dilated. So that was what a primate's aggressive snarl looked like. I skittered back, remembering Noah's warning about intent to bite. I didn't want to be within snacking distance.

My inner exterminator agreed that humans shouldn't be prowling our streets, and wished for their non-existence. But my sentimental side remembered Noah tucking me in, and playing games with Haysi and I. If the predator was emulating empathy, he deserved an award. There was more to this conqueror than my Arxur tormentors.

The Venlil receptionist wasn't backing down from her statement, and was gaining more confidence by the second. She bared her own teeth, reaching for a phone. Perhaps this employee intended to dial exterminators. I was increasingly worried about the Gaian biting this individual.

"Don't talk to Noah like that!" A Zurulian nurse trotted into the room, and glared at the receptionist. "Please, forgive Carliva; she doesn't think highly of your kind."

"Those flesh-beasts drain our resources, and our taxes go to their meat factories! They set up their encampments anywhere, and litter our big cities. Some of them don't even work!" the Venlil snapped back.

"Earth got bombed to oblivion. Those humans lost family members and everything they own. Wouldn't you be grieving too?"

The quadruped flicked her ears, and Carliva slunk off with a look of loathing. The Zurulian nurse shook her head, before approaching Noah with cautious steps. The Gaian refitted his visor, and clasped his hands behind his back. He dipped his head, perhaps to show appreciation.

"Please listen, Ambassador Noah. I can't allow you to interact with our patients," the nurse said.

Noah hissed in exasperation. "What?! I thought you were on my side!"

"I am. Many of our residents have memory problems, and wouldn't know what a human is. A scare at their advanced age could be deadly. You don't want to kill someone, do you?"

“Of course not. But Glim’s been an Arxur captive for a decade. He needs to see his Aunt Thima.”

“Why don’t I take Glim to her room, and you wait here? Then you leave after, without any unwanted incidents.”

The predator paced for a few seconds, startling the Zurulian. Even with the visor on, I could sense his unnatural eyes on me. Noah was considering whether I’d run off at the first opportunity, which was a high possibility. He must be feigning deliberation to seem reasonable. Why would he let me out of his sight?

The human went to great lengths to track my escape, and hunted me in a public venue. He wouldn’t release his catch.

“Okay. Thanks for helping us, Nurse.” The Gaian sat in a chair, which was comically small for him. “I trust you, Glim. The question is if you trust me.”

I withheld a disbelieving hiss, and tried to make sense of my sudden release. Of course I didn’t trust a predator, after years as a cattle captive! Besides, his introduction started with deceit, which eliminated any chance of mutual trust. Concealing all information about his kind didn’t inspire positive thoughts.

Noah had done an admirable job of swaying me, when I scorned any nuance originally. But our first encounter proved he was a trickster. I followed the Zurulian down a hallway, and relaxed as the Gaian didn’t follow us. This was a pristine opportunity to escape captivity; I could evade detection better in this less-integrated town.

The Zurulian stopped outside one door, and gestured for me to enter. My ears perked up with hope, as I crept into the room. Thima wheezed on her side, and her facial fur was starkly snow white. The glassiness in her eyes reminded me of cattle Venlil; drool was running down her chin. An old sitcom played on a TV, which she blankly watched.

“Thima?” I whispered.

My aunt screeched. “HELP! There’s a s-strange man in my room!”

“It’s me, Glim. I came to visit you.”

“You’re not Glim. Glim was captured by the Arxur.”

“Y-yes, that was true for 11 years. The humans traded for me. See the neck brand?”

“Human? What kind of species name is that?”

“The aliens, Thima…the predators. They returned me, your nephew.”

“Lies! I want you gone. You’re not Glim!”

“S-stop playing. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

Aunt Thima glowered at me, before wailing for assistance. She began unplugging the wires from her arms in a fit, and knocked her drinking water from the nightstand. I gaped in horror, as the one person who loved me wanted me gone. Tears swelled in my eyes, and I rushed out of the room.

The Zurulian medic yelled at me to calm down, but my feet were moving on their own. I was blind to my direction and my surroundings; the facility was a blur. There was nothing left here on Venlil Prime, not even my family. The world had changed too much to process. All I wanted was for Thima to hold me, and whisper that it was alright.

My paws wrapped around something warm, and I clung on for dear life. Sobs rattled my body, so I pressed my face into a synthetic fabric. My hugging support tensed beneath my arms, and fleshy appendages tapped my back. I let go with horror, as I realized where I‘d run. My instincts went back to *the predator* for comfort.

Noah massaged my neck. “Shhh. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“You don’t know what it’s like!” I screamed.

“Actually, I do. My dad had Alzheimer’s. I’d visit him every weekend, and he didn’t remember who I was. He’d tell me about his little boy, Noah, who wanted to be an astronaut…and I’d just smile.”

“But I…needed T-Thima. Take me back to the facility! Take me back. Anywhere but here.”

“I know it’s hard, but it’s not her fault. Are you sure you want to leave?”

“Please, get me out of here. I can’t lose anyone else. That’s not Thima anymore.”

“You don’t mean that. Sometimes, she remembers and she’s there, Glim. Tarva’s people got her to record those messages for you. She was glad you’re home.”

The Gaian picked me up, a stoic expression on his face. My profession had always taught me that predators should be eradicated, but this was the nicest hunter I'd ever encountered. For some reason, my subconscious felt bonded to Noah. He was a steady presence, when everything else was crumbling.

I couldn't ignore the evidence from our travels either. The way the Venlil receptionist spoke to my caretaker was irreverent and hostile. Judging from Tarva's phone call, it sounded like open criticism was allowed on the internet too. Those attitudes wouldn't be allowed to circulate, if humans conquered our home.

Furthermore, the oblivious Gaians at lunch had been discussing morals and sympathy. They had no way of knowing anyone was listening. With my exposure to the Arxur, I knew how different those pitying attitudes were. The grays considered keeping us as prey to be our rightful state, and they flaunted it.

"Glim, can you talk to Haysi?" Noah slid back into the car, and removed his visor. "You could help us explain it to the other refugees, better than we did for you."

Tears dripped down my cheeks. "I don't know. M-maybe."

"Okay. And do you still want me to drop contact with you, when we get back?"

The Gaian stiffened, sucking in a sharp breath. It was as if the ambassador was bracing himself for rejection; that implied it would cause him pain if I answered in the negative. Noah's body language betrayed that he cared what I thought of him. The torrent of fear since first contact seemed to have taken its toll.

"I don't think that will be necessary," I croaked.

The human curved his lips. "Good. I haven't taught you the half of our body language."

My gaze darted out the window, and a shudder crept down my spine. I, of all Venlil, shouldn't be trusting of a lying predator, but I was giving Noah a second chance. Human charisma had swayed my feelings a bit too much.

Chapter 88

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 3, 2136

The Sol System underwent a serious overhaul, since my last visit. Earth's defenses had been insufficient to ward off enemy vessels, and humanity wished to ensure such defeat never happened again. I marveled at the sheer manpower they must've dedicated to reconstruction.

According to my sensor data, the humans placed habitats as far out as the 'Oort Cloud.' It was impossible to spot the roughshod stations on the viewport. Their super-black paint absorbed almost all light, and their emissions were the only giveaway. A lesser mind might mistake the gravitational disturbances for an astronomical phenomenon.

I would assume the UN mimicked our cloaked stations, but they couldn't have developed the technology so quickly. Terrans devised those blueprints on their own.

Humans detected my ship among the icy fragments, and nailed me with enough FTL-disruptors to fry an army. Nimble fighters raced out to join me, taking up flank positions. Visual contact confirmed to Terran scouts that the incoming vessel was of Arxur make, but that didn't ease their suspicions. Perhaps they assumed the next Dominion visit wouldn't be on friendly terms.

The Terran craft had me target-locked, and circled my ship with contemplative intent. Surely their generals realized that despite our solitary nature, our ships wouldn't venture off alone to attack. My mission was diplomatic in nature; I was debating how thoroughly to betray my people. There was also the issue of the three Zurulians, who wouldn't come out when I left drinking water. They must be dehydrated and delirious by now.

I hailed the cloaked habitat, hoping humanity wouldn't make any rash decisions. It was unclear if they'd appreciate the tip-off, that their hideout wasn't undetectable. An honest appraisal seemed helpful by my standards, but it could also wound Terran pride. That concept meant more to the Dominion than Elias Meier; however,

Míngzé Zhao was not as even-keel.

“You are trespassing in the Sol system, but you know that already.” A female human with a dust-colored bowl cut appeared on screen. I recognized her as General Jones, the drone program’s lead. “To what do we owe the…*pleasure*?”

I bared my teeth. “Humans do not wish to continue open relations? Have you forgotten what we did for you so soon?”

“We didn’t expect the Arxur back here, keeping tabs on us. I know a warship when I see one, and I certainly don’t like it gunning for Earth. Why do you feel entitled to roam our home system?”

“Because I’m Chief Hunter Isif. You know, the single reason your species is still alive today. The one who gave you an army, sent food to your cities, pulled your dying from the rubble, and traded you the Venlil.”

“…I see. My nation thanked you, and housed you. That doesn’t mean you’re going to lord your aid over humanity forever. You must use proper diplomatic channels, like everyone else.”

“I’ve gone through your channels, and received a dismissive statement from Zhao. That’s unacceptable. I’ve earned some gratitude, if not respect.”

“What are you going to do, sue us?”

Malice glimmered in General Jones’ eyes, and a defiant smirk tugged at her lips. Fury swelled in my chest, threatening to spill into a roar. I was able to contain it to a growl, but I couldn’t believe what ingrates the humans were. The United Nations hadn’t been this flippant with me in the past, even after Meier’s death.

Why the sudden hostility? I came to help humanity, but now, I don’t know whether they deserve it.

Perhaps there was some truth to Shaza’s claim that the Terrans needed a kick in the teeth. If she took their bold-faced antagonism down a notch, that would be beneficial to my goals. Earth’s government warranted a reminder of their precarious position. I was less certain that I could rely on their leaders than ever.

Still, humans were the only predators who wanted to end sapient farming. Their lab-grown meat had the power to feed us, and to weaken Betterment’s grip on Arxur society. Terrans must see reason

again, when I reminded them we were on the same side. Meier understood how I defended humanity, and kept Giznel off their back.

Concerns still hounded me over the three Zurulians, hiding on my ship. I'd risked my cover on impulse, and I couldn't have them die after ferrying them here. It was worth brushing off the insult, so that my defective voice would settle down. However, I'd like to hear General Jones issue an apology, down the line. Her contemptful look was grating at my patience.

"I'm your only ally in the Dominion. The intelligence I can offer you is worth your time," I hissed.

The primate cleared her throat. "You have something you want to share? Then spit it out."

"I'll only speak to Zhao. I rule this entire sector: your sector. I directly interact with our government, and keep them off your backs. I deserve to look my equal in the eye, yes?"

"Well, tough luck. The Secretary-General is unavailable."

"Then so am I. You haven't even forwarded the request to him. If your leader can't spare a minute on a call, I can't be bothered to share my thoughts."

"I said he's unavailable. I will apprise Zhao of any intel you divulge to us."

"I want a personal chat, human! Are you fucking dense?"

Jones slanted her eyebrows. "How dare—"

"How dare YOU!" I roared. "If it was important…if I was Tarva, Zhao would make time. Hell, Tarva *herself* was more diplomatic than you people!"

The UN fighters still coasted alongside me, and I barely refrained from target-locking them. I was mistaken to think of humanity as a friend; they would always consider us second-class to the prey. The option to storm off, and communicate with Venlil Prime instead, grew more appealing by the minute. If the Terrans hadn't disrupted my FTL capabilities, I would've left in a huff.

There was no logical reason the humans would confront an Arxur ally, and spit in his face. Perhaps their vengeance had driven them mad; it was clear they were obsessed with Sol's military defenses.

Another possibility was that this American general was superseding the chain of command. She could be seeking to claim my intel for her nation alone.

Was that it? Was Jones shutting Zhao out of the loop, as a power play? Coups weren't unheard of, back when unrest plagued Wriss; rulers could change by the week.

The drone mastermind might resent that she was snubbed for Secretary-General, in favor of a general from a rival state. Undermining Zhao's regime would fashion the Americans as an appealing alternative. The ostensible status was that humans quieted all clannish tendencies, under threat of extinction. The United Nations supposedly helped them work together against aliens. But I wasn't sure Earth's tribes had laid old grudges to rest.

General Jones tapped a few buttons, before sitting in silence for a minute. "Be careful what you wish for, Isif. The Secretary-General will speak with you."

I was a bit relieved that the American-led forces hadn't done anything rash. Humans were bold enough to try to capture me, and convince me to talk through other means. From what I read on my holopad, their interrogation methods could surpass even Arxur creativity. If I'd shared those tidbits with Giznel, he'd respect their cruelty.

A human male appeared on screen, dressed in formal attire. His skin was warm and tan, while his hair was styled as a black crew cut. Forehead wrinkles indicated he was middle-aged, likely with several decades in the service. Anger oozed from his taut grimace; even his shoulders were forward, asserting dominance.

"Mr. Secretary-General, it's an honor." I forced a placid expression, and dipped my head. "I intended for us to meet much sooner. A shame, yes?"

Zhao's expression didn't change. "Well, you have my full attention now. I suppose that is what you wanted."

"It is? That American general was stalling me from contacting you. I fear she may be watching out for her national interests, at your world's expense."

"General Jones and I have an understanding. National interests mean nothing, with human interests under constant threat. That

threat is *extinction*, and it pays no mind to borders. We cannot afford squabbles."

"But Jones would not pass along my call."

"Because I told her not to. I was already listening the entire time, you know."

My eyes narrowed with outrage, and I lashed my tail. This Secretary-General would blow me off, when I came to Sol to protect his forces? For pack predators with ubiquitous empathy, they had a lousy way of showing it. Who was I kidding, to think humans would help defective Arxur? Dominion rebellion meant nothing to their self-oriented agenda.

I knew Terrans still cared about the Venlil, like their own pack. The new Secretary-General also lauded the other races that aided Earth, yet sported contempt for the Arxur. Furthermore, they launched new 'exchange programs' with the Yotul and Zurulians, while welcoming defecting herbivores to their alliance. The ever-patient humans found the resolve to train the quaking prey! To my amazement, those efforts were getting results.

Obligate carnivores just aren't convenient to their new empire…is that it? Or maybe they cannot forgive our crimes…

I gritted my teeth. "What have I ever done to you? I helped you and asked nothing in return. I could've conquered Earth, but I treated you as equals."

"That's the only reason I haven't ordered Jones to capture you, Isif," Zhao said. "With what we know today, you're no friend of humanity. Listen carefully and tell your boss; we are not supporting agendas that go against our interests."

"What are you talking about? Our interests are the same!"

"We both know that's not true. You were adamant about Fahl and Sillis being glassed, and humanity following your every command. We are not your puppets."

"What? You've gone mad, Zhao. The Dominion knows you are weak, and they won't tolerate your interference. I'm trying to keep weak predators alive into the future!"

"Weak? We are not weak. We are young, and growing exponentially."

I hissed in exasperation. “Then give yourselves time to grow. Fahl and Sillis do not help your…human first agenda, am I right?”

“It’s about the principle of encouraging our enemies to surrender. Besides, if we forked over the Tilfish and the Harchen worlds without a fight, it would cement this ‘human weakness’ in your minds. I will not set that precedent. The Arxur shall respect us.”

Secretary-General Zhao cast an unwavering glare at the screen. As much as I wanted to unload on him, my departure from Sol required humanity lifting their FTL disruptors. Securing a ride out might require groveling; politeness was mandatory for my request to leave. But at this point, I had no intent of passing along Shaza’s plans to Earth.

It felt like a betrayal, that the UN would dismiss my high-risk friendship with humanity. How could Terrans say our interests weren’t aligned, unless they were unwilling to help us? I thought we both sought a better future, and a change in the Arxur government. My defective voice wanted the hominids to like me, and accept me as one of their peers.

A delirious scream echoed behind me, and my head whipped around. One of the Zurulians had climbed atop a table, in the camera’s backdrop. It was the one who’d been crying in the cage, though she looked worse for wear. Her lips were dry from dehydration, and her eyes were half-closed with fatigue. I could see desperation glitter in her pupils.

“H-human! Help us…p-please,” she croaked, in a ragged voice.

The Secretary-General leaned forward in his chair, and his eyes widened with alarm. His jaw clenched shortly after, as he recognized the Zurulian’s paltry condition. While I appreciated that Zhao loathed our cattle practices, the quadrupeds’ deterioration wasn’t my fault. I’d risked my hide to rescue them, and I *had* provided for them. Was I supposed to flush them out at gunpoint, to drink water?

“So that’s why there are four life signatures on your ship.” The Terran’s voice was low and charged with fury. I noticed his hands typing at a holopad, likely communicating with Jones’ forces. “You’re using our friends as bargaining chips? You’d commit acts of terrorism in the Sol System?!”

I shook my head. “It’s not like that! I brought them here so you could send them home.”

“Yeah, right; conveniently forgot to mention their presence, huh? Is that your food for this week? Filthy croc.”

“That’s it! I will fucking rip you from limb-to-limb, you puny branch-swinger! I will carve out your itsy-bitsy canines…and embed them on my armor as a prize!”

“You won’t be doing anything. I was planning to catch-and-release you, but you’re better taken out of the equation. The United Nations will be bringing you into custody, Isif.”

I tried to attempt evasive maneuvers, but the UN blew out my propulsions with a single hit. My weapons system was malfunctioning, and I found the glitch rather coincidental. The Terran fighters flanking me used mechanisms to latch on to my hull seamlessly. Sparks flew behind me, as humans began breaching into the cabin. The Zurulians bounded up to the noise, yipping for aid.

The world took on a red hue, and anger overflowed into my consciousness. Feeling the need to attack something, I swung my claws at my dashboard. Electricity arced through the air, as I tore a chunk of metal out of the pedestal. Adrenaline led me to blindly throw the debris, and it nearly landed atop the Zurulians. Realizing I’d almost harmed them snapped me back to lucidity, though I was still steaming.

Why is Zhao doing this? I was a valuable asset to him, from a logistical standpoint.

The Secretary-General leaned in to another holopad. “This is a high-value prisoner. Bring him in, alive! I want to know what he knows.”

“You’re making a mistake!” I roared. “Why are you doing this?!”

“For one, you’ve learned too much about Earth’s revamps. The element of surprise is important, if worse comes to worst. An enemy Chief Hunter can’t ruin that for us.”

“Enemy? Meier knew I’m not your enemy. We want the same fucking thing, Zhao.”

“Meier was naïve. He couldn’t see an enemy if they were holding him at gunpoint.”

I curled my lip with disdain. “You don’t believe I’m an ally, just

because I'm an Arxur."

"No, I don't believe you're an ally, because we've…obtained Arxur reports. Including Shaza's partial transcript of your visit."

I leaned back on my haunches. Understanding dawned on me, as I realized that the United Nations had tapped into our communications network. Meier understood how I played things up for effect, but that knowledge hadn't been passed on to his successor. Perhaps my acting was a bit too superb, if it fooled the very people I was protecting.

My offense over Terran aggression was gone, once there was some basis for their behavior. This was all a misunderstanding; it should be easy for me to clear things up. Of course Earth wouldn't welcome someone who claimed to be using them in a war. It didn't help that I insulted Zhao in my speech, though such rhetoric was tailored for a different audience.

"What is it you think that I said?" I hissed.

"'I'm using humans to make the Dominion the supreme, unchallenged power.' Oh, what about this one? 'The UN are clueless to our aims, because Zhao is blind and on the warpath.'"

"You can't take that at face value. Read between the lines! You're intelligent. I was trying to talk Shaza down…she wants to nuke your prizes, with your forces still there."

"We know that. And we know your rationale against an attack was 'Not yet, save our strength.'"

A metallic section of the wall toppled inward, and Terran soldiers stalked inside. The primates almost tripped over the Zurulians, who ran toward their entry point. The humans rounded on me in formation, wearing goggles over their eyes. After a moment's hesitation, I sunk to my knees and raised my paws in surrender.

"Why would you tell me you know all this? You're tipping your hand," I growled.

The Secretary-General sported a malevolent grin. "Because you're never going to tell your people any of it."

A dart embedded itself in my neck, and I plucked it out on instinct. My head felt a bit woozy, before I lost my balance. The humans crept closer, readying more sedatives in case the dosage was

inadequate. My eyes fluttered, and my vision shrank to a pinhole. There was no hope of talking my way out of this situation…and it wasn't the Dominion who did me in like I imagined.

My undoing was assisting alien predators, who never planned for me to leave the Sol system again.

Chapter 89

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: December 3, 2136

The dark thoughts didn't catch up to me until we circled back to our main base, within the Tilfish metropolis. During combat, the survival instincts humans drilled into me prevailed. Emotion was something to be shut down, because it would interfere with our mission. But alone with Marcel now, I began to worry what the Terrans had awakened within me.

There must be a reason I hadn't written my parents, since our deployment to the Cradle. I had every opportunity to send a message home to Venlil Prime, yet I neglected the task of telling my folks I was okay. What kind of son would leave them in the dark, while bouncing between war zones with predators? They had just buried their other child; my brother had perished in combat with the Arxur not long ago.

I powered through during the battle, but images of that Tilfish falling lifeless haunted my mind. The scariest part was that I hardly felt anything over pulling the trigger. Marcel said, to paraphrase, that only a sociopath wouldn't feel conflicted over their first kill. Why did I feel proud, when the dust settled? What if my family thought I had become a predator, when they saw how much I'd changed?

Taking a life should've rattled me more. Yet I feel only hatred for those who would threaten the humans…just a pit of rage.

Marcel penned a letter home every day, since FTL comms couldn't reach Earth. The red-haired human was manning the UN supply tent, as we waited out our shift. Our locale was open for public grievances, as promised. Unfortunately, for the second day in a row, nobody wandered into a predator encampment. The humans needed to find a different way to connect with Sillis' populace.

Marcel smacked the paper he'd written. "How does this sound? 'The UN specifically sought out people with a love of insects and arachnids. Hell, entomologists are shortlisted for the diplomatic corps. Guess they couldn't find enough bug-lovers, because I'm stuck here.'"

“I think you’re running out of things to tell her. You’ve already talked about your discomfort,” I remarked.

“No, this one is about how they’re selecting people. Slanek, we didn’t have to be here. Humans and Tilfish share that feeling of ‘Stay the fuck away from me.’ A mutual agreement to that end could’ve avoided this shit.”

“I think such an agreement would be wrong too. We felt that same way about humans. Was the exchange program a mistake?”

“No…of course not! We’re nightmares to the Tilfish, and they’re nightmares to us. I just meant we didn’t have to kill each other over it. Avoidance was possible.”

“But when we cleared the rogue settlement, that wasn’t avoidable. Didn’t we have to kill them, Marc? Didn’t you like cleaning up the neighborhood patrols?”

The Terran stared at me for a long moment. “I don’t like killing anyone. I told you at the protest; it’s a last resort.”

“Life is precious, right? You humans just shut the kill switch on and off as you please.”

“What the fuck are you on about?”

“It’s easy for you to commingle violence and empathy! Your emotions never run amok, but they’re never absent either. Maybe Venlil instincts exist for a reason…because we shouldn’t flip that switch.”

Marcel placed his letter down, and his mouth fell into an o-shape. The human inspected me with piercing eyes, scanning my mannerisms with ease. This was my closest friend in the universe; it was like he could peer into my soul. Doubts racked my mind, along with shame and fear. What if the training from Sara’s instinct program had gone too far? Was I turning into someone I didn’t want to become?

“Slanek, are you okay?” the Terran asked.

I slumped my shoulders. “Violence should sicken me…I’m a Venlil, a timid one at that. I blew someone’s head off! But I can’t make myself feel guilty.”

“Easy buddy. There’s no right way to process your experience. You were focused on surviving, and now you’re confused. Because you

feel like you had to…because you think our mission is justified."

"I regret that I *had* to kill them, but I don't wish they were still alive!"

The alien leaned back on his haunches, running a hand through his auburn hair. I could see Marcel's scarred face contort, as he contemplated what I said. My human must be horrified by these words, though his kind were excellent at masking negative reactions. Scathing judgments must be running through his brain at this second; I wasn't the innocent Venlil he'd befriended.

I remember how proud Marcel had been at my first combat simulator, and how fervently my human encouraged me. He'd warned me not to change myself, certainly not for his sake. Now, I saw the changes he was referring to. The program taught me to manage my fears, but I'd lost my identity along the way. A soldier without empathy was no more trustworthy than a coward.

I'm still a liability to Marcel, just in a different way. He deserves a better Venlil as his buddy.

The vegetarian chuckled, and shook his head. "Hey, I set a building on fire, because I *hate* the exterminators. It's okay to hate those sadistic fucks."

"You're a more aggressive species."

"Times are changing, Slanek. Upbringing plays a large part in—"

Mandibles clacked outside the supply tent, and a young Tilfish scuttled through the flap. Marcel instinctively tugged his legs back at the child's approach, and forgot our conversation. It was a bit amusing how the human forgot to breathe. How could this soldier endure a shootout with dozens of insectoids, but a close-up kid mortified him?

The Tilfish child moved a leg along Marcel's arm with curiosity; I think the sleeve cuffs baffled our visitor. The red-haired human gulped, and made a visible attempt to relax. His pale hand fished into a drawer, and for a moment, I feared he was grabbing a gun. Perhaps I should've stepped in, instead of having a chuckle at his instincts.

Marcel secured a small stick beneath his fingers, which had a circular object resting atop it. He undid a wrapper over the sphere, and held it out to the Tilfish. The child giggled, accepting the gift.

His compound eyes studied the specimen, not understanding its purpose.

“That’s a lollipop, son. You suck on the red circle; it’s sugar.” The human spoke in a gentle voice, though it was fraught with discomfort. “Just don’t eat the stick. That’s not food.”

“Thank you!” the Tilfish squealed. “I’m Virnt. Wanna be friends?”

“Sure! I’m Marcel. You’re a brave little guy, aren’t you? You know, my daughter, Nulia, loves sweets too.”

I flicked my ear in amusement. “Wait a second. Marc, you brought candy just to give to Tilfish children? The ones that creep you out?”

“Of course I did! You really don’t know me at all, do you?”

“And you brought Venlil plushies on the cradle for Nulia.”

“That…wasn’t for Nulia. Is that judgment I hear, Slanek?”

Virnt pawed at Marcel’s leg, asking to be picked up. The human shivered, but helped the child onto his lap. His hand drifted atop the insectoid’s exoskeleton. His cheeks were ashen with visible disgust; Terrans acted like Tilfish carried some lethal disease. The fear wasn’t founded on being eaten alive. Despite the comparisons, it wasn’t the same brand as our instincts toward them.

General Birla staggered into the tent, antennae flailing with fear. Her mandibles clicked, at the sight of Virnt cuddling with the predator. I gauged from her stricken demeanor that this was her son. Her six legs blurred with motion, and she snatched the youngling away from Marcel. The kid squeaked in protest, clinging to the lollipop.

The insectoid held her son close for a long time, and Marcel watched with a casual stare. As the sole Tilfish general to vote against Earth’s raid, Birla must have had her reasons to spare the hunters. But it was clear from our brief interactions that she feared what the Terrans would do to Sillis.

Certainly Birla can see how sweet Marcel was being, I mused. *And how hard he works against his own instincts.*

Birla straightened her antennae. “I told you *never* to t-touch the humans! I also told you to wait outside the t-tent until I got permission.”

“Humma is nice. *Very* nice humma. We’re friends!” Virnt clicked.

“Humans do NOT like us. I explained this to you twice. Soldier Marcel, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, really…please, don’t tell the little guy that. I don’t mind,” the vegetarian said.

“I’ve visited human units across the Mercantile region. I can see plainly that you do mind us.”

“What do you mean? Have we done something wrong, General?”

“You’re the predators here, but…you’re afraid of us too. There’s always someone who gets startled, and even a few that scream like prey. I don’t want you to hurt Virnt out of fear.”

Marcel narrowed his eyes. “I was never going to hurt him. I’m sorry if I overstepped, giving him that treat.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just trying to understand humans. Everything I learn adds more questions. What about us alarms you so much?”

“Er, on our world, insects indicate rotting food and contamination. We see Tilfish as harbingers of disease. My brain screams to get you away, as fast as possible. But I know you’re not a threat, and I’m sorry that I feel that way toward you.”

General Birla was silent for a long moment, before releasing Virnt from her grasp. The Tilfish child bounced back to the human, and nuzzled his warm leg. I expected the Terran’s shudder this time. Marcel’s biological responses made sense from an evolutionary perspective, especially through the lens of ancient predation. Meat stores must attract disease-carrying insects frequently.

This wasn’t exactly the insight I hoped to extract from the Terran. Because of the incursion, Marcel hadn’t fully addressed my personal concerns. I did feel better having the truth off my chest, but I hadn’t spilled my familial distancing. Part of me wondered what the human was saying about upbringing. Had I branched off so far from my roots, that I was unrecognizable to other Venlil?

“I’m sorry that I’m afraid of you too,” Birla sighed. “That’s why I voted against hitting Earth. There wasn’t an argument for it that wasn’t speculative…based in fear.”

Marcel pursed his lips. “Fear comes from the imagination, not reality. I sure hope I’m not as terrible as you imagined.”

“No. If you’re wondering why I’m here, it’s because I wanted to talk

to you. It's obvious how much your Venlil adores you, and I know who you two are. I'm sure you've heard that before."

"Unfortunately. Everyone who tuned into Noah's speech…trillions of aliens saw me at the worst moment of my life."

"S-sorry. That was insensitive of me. I shouldn't have brought that up."

The red-haired human took the empty lollipop stick away from Virnt, and dropped it in a trash bin. I was curious to try one of those sweets myself, though it might sound childish to ask. Marcel misinterpreted my stare, and beckoned with a finger. I mewled as I approached, and pressed my ear against his nice nails.

The Terran soldier smiled. "It's alright, Birla. If you're here to talk about something serious, I must ask why you brought your son."

"Virnt likes the 'hummas' on TV. Thinks you're fun…and squishy? I let him tag along, since it might make him stop asking about you. I don't want him reported for predator disease, even if I, um, see the signs too."

I tilted my head. "That is a serious prognosis. You should get him screened soon. No normal child isn't scared of predators, at least a little."

"Slanek!" Marcel hissed. "Predator disease is your catch-all term for anything outside 'herd normals.' You want this kid electroshocked for being curious about humans?!"

"No…I just think it's in the community's interest to be vigilant. Birla is his mother, and she admittedly sees the signs."

"We are going to have a *long* talk about this in private. General, there's nothing wrong with Virnt. Don't let any bigots tell you otherwise."

"Humma likes me!" the Tilfish child cheered.

"Yeah, I sure do, kiddo."

Sorrow tugged at Marcel's expression, spilling into the occasional pointed look at me. I saw a glimmer of protectiveness in his gaze, while Virnt played with his bootlaces. The human was more judgmental over suggesting a medical screening, than my admission about my first kill. It was like my best friend thought I wanted to hurt a child!

It's sad that some people are a danger to society. We can help a few of them…if we catch it early.

The vegetarian swallowed. "Anyhow, to business. What can I do for you, Birla?"

"I've heard reports of UN divisions picking up and leaving in a hurry. Many Tilfish see it as a victory, driving off human invaders. But I know there's something more going on," she explained.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about. Nobody here's left."

"It seems the units in the big cities are the last to leave. It's like the UN wants their departure to go unnoticed. If I'm right, I expect them to pull you guys out within the hour."

"Is that so? I told you we hoped a ground occupation wouldn't last long. Maybe the UN is stepping back now."

My ears perked up with hope; General Birla had no reason to lie about Terran actions. Did that mean the predators were moving us somewhere else? It was clear that the locals didn't want us on Sillis, so a hands-off approach might be best. The humans didn't want to be here longer than was necessary anyways.

"*All UN personnel, please proceed immediately to your evacuation zone."* A monotone human voice poured through the PA system, with impeccable timing. "*Do not use public transit, or contact the natives. Avoid combat engagements if possible. Orbital threat level is severe.*"

Birla's antennae flailed. "W-what? Orbital threat level? Are…are you airstriking us into s-submission?"

"Of course not!" Marcel growled. "That message is referring to an external threat. It can only be the grays, to merit such a hasty response."

"The Arxur? No! We s-surrendered to you to s-stop their genocide, and you're just leaving us to die? What about t-the Tilfish down here?"

"I hear what you're saying. If evacuating civilians isn't a primary directive, then our escape must hinge on not being slowed down *at all*. The UN could be expecting an attack within the hour."

"B-broadcast a message for civilians to get to bunkers, at least. P-please!"

“I’m…sure we will. Come with us, Birla. We’re getting out of here.”

Fear returned to my bloodstream, as I noted the eerie similarities to the cradle. To say those memories rattled me was an understatement. But if Marcel and I escaped that chaos, there was no reason we couldn’t do it again. At least this time, the bombs hadn’t started falling yet. Back then, we hadn’t known the Arxur arrived until Gojid settlements were being leveled.

With no time to waste, we cleared out of the tent quickly. The Tilfish general followed Marcel, who was toting Virnt into his arms. I hurried after them, and the human only glanced back a single time. The vegetarian must be livider about my ‘predator disease’ comments than I thought. Why would he let a small disagreement cause a rift between us?

“I’m sorry, Marc,” I offered timidly.

Marcel sighed. “You’re only sorry because I’m pissed. I’ll accept your apology when you know *why* you’re sorry.”

Distant flashes twinkled on Sillis’ largest moon, which I assumed housed planetary defenses. It was uncanny to see a full-fledged battle, reduced to white and orange dots amidst blackness. Ships must be clashing overhead, as the UN fleet fought to restrain the enemy. It put into perspective the staggering distance between us and a higher-orbit engagement.

Explosions continued to flood the sky, with increasing frequency. I wondered if any stargazing civilians had noticed the indicators; the nighttime was a microcosm of death. A ticking clock was hiding in plain sight, marking our dwindling time to get off this world. I hoped the humans fared better in Sillis’ initial defense than the catastrophe of the cradle.

Chapter 90

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 3, 2136

Once the Arxur arrived at Sillis, the humans' usage of FTL disruptors was strategic. The blocking effects were limited to upper orbit, and that allowed our fleet to travel further out. While the enemy was knocked to real speed, we were still zipping through subspace. The Terran warships were patient and dutiful in following the grays, all the way from Khoa. Stalking the reptilians across vast distances showcased the UN's predatory roots.

Our shadow fleet emerged from FTL travel, just shy of the active disruptor zones. A gap of light-years had been bridged in minutes, and our signatures were muddled by the Arxur's own wakes. Their fleet size was around ten thousand strong, and ours paled by comparison. But humanity had a few tricks on standby, and we hoped to make the child-eaters suffer.

From the sensors station, Onso and I parsed through the grays' transmissions. A female reptile was taunting the humans, by mocking their defensive line. This was wondrous confirmation that the Arxur were officially enemies of Earth. Sillis had been expecting the attack, judging by their organized formation. However, the evac shuttles leaving the surface suggested their notice was limited.

"Sovlin, you're up!" Tyler snapped his fingers together, which made me wince. I was unfamiliar with the painful-looking gesture. "We're going for a pincer movement. Your task is to make sure that none of them escape. As a secondary job, watch for target-locks and inbound fire."

I snapped upright. "Yes, sir!"

"Onso, Captain Monahan was impressed with your thinking. I want you to brainstorm aggressive options; keep them ready and up-to-date. That'll be on top of managing the viewport."

"You got it!" the Yotul yipped.

"Harris and Romero, scan for any noteworthy signals from the surface. We need to have a full grasp of the situation as it

progresses."

Carlos frowned with disdain. "Understood…sir."

"Great. Sounds fun," Samantha said dryly.

With our tasks dished out, the sensors station was focused on the battlefield. The Terrans delegated duties with impeccable organization; there were dozens of moving parts on the bridge. Back in my days as captain, I'd never had such an efficient crew. Humans could always do more than us with less manpower. Their snap decisions were better than the Federation's months of planning.

I remember what Tyler said about humans craving victory and domination. Maybe that reprehensible drive is what gives them the edge.

But this wasn't the Kolshian fleet we'd dismantled with ease, nor was it the small raiding band that hit the cradle. This was every Arxur ship in a hundred light-year radius, meant as a show of force. It was impressive enough to put my spines at full bristle. Seeing the monsters swarming Sillis, I decided they'd been holding back against the Federation. A vendetta against any particular world would ensure its death.

Why wouldn't the Dominion vanquish us all, if they had the decisive edge? Perhaps such a move would force us to unify further…or to flee. Chasing their food source off would crush hunting opportunities, and render swaths of space preyless. The balance was hitting the Federation enough to keep us scared. They didn't want us to believe we could win, but they didn't encourage the idea that all was lost either.

"The sensor overlap didn't confuse them long enough. We're quite visible," Onso said. "Look at the viewport…their rear flank is pivoting."

Captain Monahan glowered at the screen. "Sensors, how bad are the numbers?"

"The UN garrison on Sillis has about a thousand and a half ships, minus civvies and transports," I replied. "Then, there's a thousand of us from the shadow unit."

"Understood. We're making our move, people. Fire our weapons right behind the shield-breakers. We only get one chance at a first strike."

That was our hope: that the grays didn't know about our shield developments. One-hits were still unlikely, since Arxur ships had significant armor beneath ionic barriers. This trick wouldn't rattle them for as long as the Kolshians. However, even a demon would derive some confusion from shield outages. We'd have to see how many bullets their plating could absorb.

Testing our enemies' defenses fell to the human gunships. The UN commenced its electromagnetic ambush with a literal bang, by hurling missiles into the Arxur's midst. Each detonation tossed out shrapnel, though most explosives were stopped en route. Crucially, the volleys blasted away the shields of nearby grays. This proved the magnet-bomb's effectiveness against all current ships, not just the Federation armada.

"Let's give them something to chew on," Monahan growled.

The Terran crew members dipped into our new cache of bullets without hesitation. A relentless spray of our munitions rippled across the Arxur's rear flank. Kinetics punched holes in their steel plating, with other UN ships chipping in. Armor-piercing shells chewed through 80 centimeters of steel alloys like it was nothing.

It seemed the Terrans had figured out the Arxur's specifications, and tailored their weapons accordingly. Humans traded in firing speed for sheer power; from the results, their choice seemed justified. I was appalled that the Earthborne predators devised bullets which could puncture that deeply. Why had they crafted so many killing abominations for intraspecies wars?

The grays' evasive maneuvers were nigh instantaneous, as though rehearsed. Rather than bumbling into each other like the Federation, the Arxur communicated to avoid collisions. They turned sharply across our flight path, and were aided by a small turn radius. The enemy's mobility presented an added layer of difficulty for human targeting systems.

Sensors confirm hits on about 400 hostiles. That's solid, but not as much as I hoped.

It was then that the planetary defenses revealed themselves on Sillis' moon; lights decorated the lunar body, near its volcanic centers. Fearsome lasers pounded the grays, concentrated strikes that melted the hardiest ships. The Tilfish's orbital constructions had been hastily reassembled, after most infrastructure was lost to

the post-Earth raids.

With each crackle from the moon, the Arxur weaved in different patterns. Their bombers initiated twists through the air, and changed orientations on a dime. A small posse swooped toward the lunar body, dodging attempted strikes with wild flying. I could see the glimmer in the humans' eyes, acknowledging a skilled foe. Even if they wouldn't vocalize it, the Terrans respected the grays' quick adaptation.

"T-there's about three thousand fighters, whipping around to face us. A few hundred going for the moon, and the rest…" I muttered.

"Focused on the defenders and the planet," Onso finished.

Tyler cleared his throat. "How many enemy casualties? Visually, it…doesn't look too convincing."

"A bit shy of a thousand, per the sensors." I chewed at my claws, and stared at the oncoming formation. "I see a worrying pattern here, fighting every battle outnumbered."

Samantha flashed her teeth. "He wasn't quizzing your pattern recognition skills. Taking on the entire galaxy has its drawbacks, obviously."

"Right. I know you said not to let the fuckers escape…but unless you reasonably think you can win, it's us who need to pull back," I offered.

Tyler raised an eyebrow. "Without even meeting them head-on?"

"Five attempted target-locks on us already. Do you think we can survive that? The grays are gunning for the Terran-made ships, not the Federation retrofits."

The blond human narrowed his icy eyes, and jogged over to the captain. Monahan was on the comms with the rest of our fleet, plotting our overarching strategy. The Arxur ships sailed closer, and I could make out their signature twin railguns. That one-two punch could hammer a target on both sides, ensuring serious damage. It also made evasion a steep task, at the cost of splitting power output.

On the opposite side of the battlefield, I could see the Arxur firing a hefty barrage at the UN defenders. Several grays feinted toward the planet, hoping that the humans would be reckless to prevent orbital strikes. However, our goal was to mitigate the damage rather than

stop it altogether. The Terrans had no intent of throwing a key battle for the Tilfish inhabitants.

It was a small sacrifice to halt the Arxur's aggression, in the scope of the galaxy. Humans were logical when it came down to their survival, and they hadn't forgotten the Tilfish's part in the Krakotl coalition. That was why I expected Captain Monahan to second my assessment, pulling back before we could sustain heavy damage.

"Reverse thrust at full power! We're going to clear our FTL disruptor zone," Monahan barked. "Drones will run interference on the Arxur's targeting systems."

I could see the automated craft gunning forward, and snaking through the enemy ranks to confuse their systems. That move hindered the grays from lining us up, whenever the drones obstructed their shot. The Arxur must be guffawing at our cowardice, as we receded through the night sky. Smaller Terran ships were pushing a considerable fraction of light speed, leading the retreat.

The other human wing, defending Sillis, spit out a few shots before surrendering their posts. They dove into the planet's atmosphere for cover, and conceded orbital range to the Arxur. The UN was sacrificing the very target they sought to protect altogether! This concession spit in the face of military doctrine; then again, the "defenders' disadvantage" was linked to being tied down.

The Terrans' only objective was to best the grays in combat, and I suppose that meant regrouping elsewhere. Arxur bombers were mopping up the planetary defenses on Sillis' moon, with no friendlies assigned to its defense. The lunar bases succumbed after chucking a few bombs; it was a last-ditch attempt to take some hostiles with them. Seemingly, humanity was losing a battle for the first time since Earth.

"We're out of range of the FTL disruptors!" I yelled to Tyler, in a breathy voice. "M-might be able to stall enough to jump out."

"We're not jumping anywhere!" Captain Monahan snapped her chin toward my shouting, with dilated eyes the size of moons. "Our goal is to cover the rear contingent as they warp out."

Officer Cardona skipped back to his post. "Yep. Change of plans, Gojid. You see any ship target-locking the ships in warp prep, you

let me know."

"Yes, sir. May…may I ask why we're not *all* warping out?" I questioned.

"Skipper says those ships are going to warp back here in staggered intervals. Something about FTL keeping the enemy paranoid. The rest of us…our goal is to maintain a stalemate, and keep the grays' attention."

A third of our shadow fleet, which was already lacking in numbers, had retreated well behind our main formation. I could see UN breakaways spooling up their drives on sensors, and plotting warp paths in a stationary limbo. The process generated a gravitational disturbance that was tough to miss. Guarding ships that were out of the fray seemed like a foolish task.

Perhaps my prior assessment, that humans were the most advanced military in the galaxy…perhaps it was premature.

The Arxur had swatted away the drones, though a few automatons were still harassing them. Unlike the Kolshians, the grays excelled at manual targeting. The foul predators' reflexes took over, and defied all predictability from Terran algorithms. There was no rhyme or reason, just their impulse at the current moment. Spontaneity couldn't be simulated or projected, not even by a human contraption.

Despite the daunting odds, it was up to our manned craft to hold them back. Terran warships tested the waters with a few plasma beams, though my particular craft held our fire. Two behemoth carriers opened their bellies, and spawned a number of UN fighters. Without enemy shielding, perhaps their nimble dogfighting stood a chance.

Onso flicked his ears at Tyler. "Do the fighters have plasma weaponry?"

"A few do. The ones molded from patrol boats have small plasma rounds," the human answered. "Overall, we prefer kinetics. Why?"

"We should blind the bastards up-close. Throw it right in their face —er, I mean, viewport."

"That could be a good supplementary play. I'll pass that along, buddy."

The Arxur had extreme light sensitivity, due to their forward-facing pupils. For some reason, humans were not as susceptible to these tactics; Noah's greeting party made them aware of the idea, though. Shining a bunch of plasma flares right at the grays might work in a space setting too.

The initial foray didn't appear to be going well; momentum had swung in the enemy's favor. The Terrans' smaller craft weren't faring well against the heavyweights. Dominion bombers powered up coaxial railguns, and took out fighters by the dozen. Even without shielding, tiny kinetic-based ships weren't getting the job done.

Onso's tip must've been relayed to the charging fighters, because a few human ships went for a pass. These must be the boats with plasma munitions. Their turrets unloaded at much shorter ranges, and with less power than a railgun. However, their firing speed allowed them to spew energy bolts one after the other.

The grays' relied on optical reflexes, but in this instance, that was an exploitable weakness. Blinding plasma streaked across their field of vision, and left their ships heedless to incoming munitions. The Arxur were forced to backpedal, dampening their breakneck pace. That was fortuitous for us, since our stalled ships still needed time to achieve warp.

Monahan signaled to weapons and navigations. "Move forward! I want us in missile range, yesterday! Fire the railgun while we're advancing."

The lights dimmed on the bridge, as our railgun projected molten munitions toward the Arxur. The carnivores were disoriented, and unable to enact evasive maneuvers. Our warship's beam sundered one enemy with its scorching power, and left it as a lifeless husk. Fittingly, its crew was doomed to slow suffocation.

Others in our fleet surged forward, using aggression to keep the enemy at bay. Fighter allies capitalized on the blinding too, dispensing their kinetic haul. This was our primary stand, buying precious seconds for the Terrans' elusive plan. If we could whittle the enemy down to a more manageable ratio, that was a bonus. It was possible we'd lose our own hides, should we falter.

It was that very sentiment that the primates greeted with impassivity. The aliens on the bridge found our eyes drawn to

certain humans; there was something new in the predators' gaze. It looked like acceptance…because they knew high casualties were probable. How could they be so calm?

There's more in their war-brain than the dominating urge, the call of predator instincts. Self-sacrifice for a comrade comes naturally to humans.

The Arxur attempted to shirk our advance, but we adjusted our vectors to match them. Our opponents had shaken off the blinding tactic, and refocused on UN ships that were warping out. My orders plainly stated that their destruction could not happen. I highlighted several vessels on my sensors, ones who were trying to establish target-locks on the warp group.

Tyler took the cue, without any explanation. "Here's our targets! Bury them!"

Each UN warship picked their mark, and we began swapping missiles with the grays. One enemy projectile was arcing a bit too close for comfort, but we intercepted it first. Our own success rate was also paltry, with the Dominion bombers picking off numerous warheads. At least it distracted them from the vulnerable warpers, for a moment.

I glanced at my sensors readout, feeling my stomach flip from nerves. We couldn't protect sitting targets much longer; the Arxur's numbers were far more than we could hope to restrain. Hostile bombers, fresh from demolishing Sillis' moon, were joining up as reinforcements. Our last trick had been executed, and now, this was a straight-up brawl.

In hindsight, the Terrans should've withheld a sect of the shadow fleet from the beginning. But the main ambush was supposed to be deadlier, and we expected to scatter the enemy. I figured the reason our ship lingered was because the brass realized every craft couldn't escape. Someone had to guard the jump point.

Captain Monahan stomped her foot empathically. "Do not let the Arxur get anything off at the rear flank!"

"They're aiming for us too! There's a target-lock on our ship!" I called out.

"Dammit. If we try to evade, they get an opening. Shoot them first!"

A weapons tech coughed. "There's no time to calibrate…"

“Eyeball it! Give me a Hail Mary.”

The Terrans identified the ship target-locking us, and swiveled the railgun in its direction. With the vastness of space, it normally took several seconds to align the sights and set the coordinates. The technician squinted through one binocular eye, as though that would enhance her predator instincts. She jerked the railgun on target, and scrolled across the viewport quickly.

I knew the task was impossible, given that humans didn’t possess omnipotence. Picking something that looked about right wasn’t enough; it had to be perfect. Dozens of factors went into a successful kill. Bungling a single one, such as our ship’s vector, their distance, and their future location, would cause a hopeless miss. Not even an apex predator could ‘eyeball’ that in a second.

“Carlos? Sam? I’m…glad I got to know you,” I croaked.

Samantha sighed. “There’s no other racist war criminal I’d rather spend my last moments with.”

Carlos chuckled to himself. “Likewise. We saved each other’s ass a few times, huh?”

“Yeah. Mostly me saving you,” I snorted.

The plasma railgun had released its ‘Hail Mary’, but I couldn’t bring myself to watch. Why spend my last seconds dwelling on our failure? Perhaps I understood the acceptance in the predators’ eyes earlier. Everyone aboard this vessel knew we could wind up dead, and we endured that risk. Monahan could’ve dodged our target-lock, yet the captain put the mission first.

I didn’t understand why the Terrans had their eyes glued to the viewport. That impossible hope persisted in them to the last, unwilling to acknowledge reality. But there was no sense in crushing their childish optimism, in their last moments. The loss of my friends, of Marcel’s packmate, and even primitive Onso weighed on my heart. The last emotion I felt was grief.

Claps, whoops, and cheers sounded across the bridge, which startled me half to death. Onso focused the viewport on a shattered vessel, which must’ve taken a hit to the drive column. I glanced at my sensors, and saw the target-lock was gone. That was not possible, even for a predator; the odds were astronomical! There was no way any living being could land such a shot.

“We’re alive! We fucking made it!” Tyler hollered.

I exhaled a shaky breath. Humanity had sustained a few losses, but our warship wasn’t among them. Miraculously, our stall tactics had delayed the enemy for enough time. Dots from the rear contingent vanished off sensors, one after the other. Those UN ships warped out in a hurry, and I had no clue where they’d gone.

The humans succeeded in getting a few players out of the system. Now, we were stuck here, and we had to find a way to survive.

Chapter 91

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: December 3, 2136

The bombs began falling within minutes. From our vantage point, the explosions were mere smoky blips on the horizon. Orange pops illuminated the night like wildfire, but I knew they were destructive strikes against Sillis' supercontinent. How had the Arxur gotten within orbital range so quickly? Why had the human defenders been unable to slow them down at all?

Terror chilled my fur, as I guessed the UN was no longer challenging the front flank at all. The streaks in the sky were further out now, judging by their diminished luminance. There was no indication on our radio chatter that we'd sustained catastrophic losses; I believed in my predators too strongly to accept that the defensive line was wiped out upon arrival. That left me to believe… the Terrans chose a strategic retreat.

"I think the blue helmets above abandoned us." Marcel's hazel eyes were bulging, as he held Virnt against his chest. "Birla, do you know the quickest way to the spaceport?"

The Tilfish general scuttled forward anxiously. "W-what? You're not d-defending the planet at all?! So you *are* just leaving us to d-die…"

"General, honestly, I don't think Sillis is our concern. The UN wants the best fighting chances. It seems they're taking up a position elsewhere."

"T-there's billions of civilians. K-kids…"

"There were kids on Earth too!" Marcel snapped, before drawing a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I know the Tilfish populace had nothing to do with it, but I get us not wanting to lose more human lives."

Honestly, my friend's anger made perfect sense; the emotional distress was visible in his eyes. It was unreasonable to expect the humans to fight tooth-and-nail for an enemy, even if they'd done so on the cradle. The difference was that the Gojidi Union was stopped, before they could deal any damage to Earth. Even I harbored a grudge against the Tilfish, for the heartache the raid caused.

General Birla hadn't seen human cities buried in rubble, and predators burned half-alive. She hadn't watched massive soldiers drop to their knees, sobbing brokenly. After the vengefulness that surfaced in the following week, I would've pegged the Terrans to glass this planet themselves. It was merciful that cooler heads found reasons to accept a surrender at all.

"P-please, Marcel. I know you, and all of humanity, have suffered. But how can you let children die?" Birla pleaded.

The human covered Virnt's antennae carefully. "Funny. I remember wondering aloud how the Federation could slaughter us…saying those exact words to Slanek. Just like you are implying about us. If it was my call, Birla, I would save as many lives as I could."

"Then save some of us. However many you can!"

"I am. I'm saving you and Virnt!"

Marcel placed the Tilfish child atop his helmet, adding another adornment to his cranium. Virnt had been quiet, ever since the bombs started falling. I doubted he understood the gravity of the situation, but at the least, the kid recognized our demeanor shifts. The young insectoid's eyes lit up briefly from his new perch.

"So high! Humma is tall as a mountain," Virnt giggled.

My best friend quickened his steps. "We're about to be *much* higher. Because Birla is taking us to the spaceport, right? And we're gonna evacuate?"

The Tilfish general cleared her throat. "Yes. Follow me."

Birla scuttled through a nearby alley, and my human followed. I hustled after them, though my legs weren't as durable as theirs. Marcel glanced back at me briefly, and I gave him the most "adorable" head-tilt I could muster. His response was an exasperated sigh, before barking to pick up the pace. If my groveling couldn't melt his frigid act, our relationship was in dire straits.

The human had never shut me out, since the beginning of the exchange program. Now, out of the blue, we weren't on speaking terms? It was unfair to push me away, especially when our lives were in imminent peril. Hell, it was almost manipulative. All I did was advise Birla to take Virnt to a medical professional, like any reasonable person.

To make a hopeless situation worse, a bone-chilling bark reverberated behind me. I knew without looking that the guttural cry belonged to Dino. The slobbery dog had a habit of waiting outside my tent, and seeking me out during its downtime. The humans allowed it to roam the base wherever it pleased, without a care for who it bothered.

Of course, its handler couldn't have collected it for the evacuation. It had to be breathing down my haunches during a raid.

Birla screamed. "P-predator! R-run!"

"No, it's okay! Dino, SIT!" Marcel bellowed.

The filthy mutt whined, and lowered its rump to the ground. Its sable tail thrashed the pavement, while its brown eyes studied me. The pink tongue lolling out of its mouth was covered in saliva flecks. It was a relief the dog obeyed, with how it had been barreling down on our position. The demon could sprint faster than a human, while sharing their tirelessness.

Dogs are persistence predators too, aren't they? I realized. *That's why the humans favor them…and once used them for hunting.*

"Slanek, the dog's with you." The human's low voice made it clear there was no room for argument. "Unless you want to be difficult?"

I drew a shuddering breath. "I'm n-not the one being difficult. Dino seems nicer than you right now."

That last statement wasn't quite heartfelt, but I wouldn't give Marcel the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort. The dog bounded along at my side, and I tried not to focus on its monstrous presence. Birla seemed wary of the beast, though Virnt was testing out the word 'dog' with giddiness. The longer I observed the Tilfish child, the more I thought something wasn't right with his wiring.

Marcel had his service weapon drawn, and eyed Tilfish civilians we passed warily. The human was aware of our present vulnerability to a rebel attack. This city's populace resented us more, after we gassed and deafened them at their initial protest. My friend was the one who ordered the curfew, so they might have particular disdain for him.

Birla steered us past factories and storage units, keeping her own eyes peeled. The Tilfish general was avoiding crowded areas where possible; I hoped that wasn't at the expense of time. Arxur landing

parties crested above us, and skirted the occasional anti-air fire. Humans weren't putting much pressure on them, with their focus on evacuation.

"*Arxur units are arriving in most major cities. If your location hasn't been bombed yet, that means hostiles inbound,*" a gravelly voice said over the radio. "*All evacuation shuttles need to be off the ground in ten minutes.*"

Marcel's eyes darted around. "Shit! Are we going to make it?"

"With time to spare," Birla answered. "Cut through the incubator facility here, and it'll just take a few minutes. Saves a lot of time not to go around."

"Good. I'm sure glad you're here."

The Tilfish general didn't return the compliment. She ducked into a circular building, which took up an entire block with its daunting size. Virnt leaned over Marcel's forehead and started playing with his helmet straps. The Terran scolded his passenger, ordering the little one to remain still. The kid fell limp with a sad look.

Tilfish geneticists protested the intrusion, though they quickly retreated when Marcel's gun pivoted. I knew this place was sacred to an egg-laying species; it was where they raised their offspring to hatching day. Teams of medical professionals were dedicated to maintaining the ideal conditions, and saving any younglings that hatched early.

The Harchen and the Krakotl were protective of such institutions too. It was rare any egg-laying race trusted a mammalian species to wander their fragile safehouses. All it took was one clueless sapient messing with an egg to burst its bubble.

I can only imagine how these Tilfish feel about a predator soldier, taking a shortcut through here. Not to mention Dino mucking up the place!

We strode past an observation room, partitioned off down the hallway. Marcel studied the x-rays monitoring each egg's health, and his facial features softened. He took a second to peer at the orange pods through the incubator glass. Labels were affixed to every specimen, identifying the parents. The human slowly digested that those globs were someone's kid.

Birla cleared her throat. "T-there's…no time to s-snack. Let's go?"

“You think I wanted to *eat them*?!” Marcel hissed. “I was just curious. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Sorry. Your expression turned very weird.”

“I was imagining Virnt as an egg, and…wondering how many you, um, lay at once.”

“Twenty or thirty. Y-your eyes went very wide. Is that, er, normal?”

“I’m just surprised. That is a lot. Where are Virnt’s siblings?”

“Thrown away!” the child cheered. “I’m the chosen one.”

Disbelief flashed in Marcel’s hazel eyes, after absorbing Virnt’s decree. The Tilfish general flicked her antennae, and the human took the hint to move along. We turned into a lengthy walkway, chasing off more staffers. My lungs ached from keeping up with the Terran; Dino’s nightmarish presence wasn’t helping me breathe either.

Birla sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told Virnt the honest answer.”

“You…throw your eggs away?” Marcel asked, in a voice that crept an octave higher. “I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“It’s not like that; please, let me explain. These days, most Tilfish decide how many children they want to have. 20 is a lot, like you said, and all at once…it’s a tall order.”

“Yeah, I see why parents wouldn’t sign up for that. So you decided you wanted one kid, Birla?”

“Virnt is the lucky one, like he said! You see, we used to hold an average of about five eggs kept. Ever since first contact, more people wanted 1 or 2…like the other races.”

“Ha. It must’ve looked like other species had it easy, compared to you.”

“Indeed. With technology nowadays, we can pick which eggs are most viable early on. Doctors run tests to avoid defects, and they can find positive traits too. Virnt was predisposed to intelligence, so I chose him.”

Birla led us past a spacious laboratory, and explained its features quickly. Microscopes and testing machines lined the room, along with bins of Tilfish eggs. This gave Marcel a visual of how large a litter was; honestly, each jar looked like one of those gumball

machines on Earth. I doubted humans could handle that many offspring.

I couldn't imagine juggling twenty newborns at once; the Venlil devoted ample time rearing a single child. It wouldn't surprise me if the Tilfish had to abandon their weakest young in the past. How else would the herd survive, without sacrifices? That was a lot of mouths to feed, prior to the post-scarcity era. It made it somewhat understandable why they became omnivores.

"Exit out the rear door up ahead, and cross the street. We almost made it to the spaceport," Birla clicked.

Virnt bounced on the Terran's helmet. "Awesome! To space with humma!"

The tour had been a welcome distraction from the Arxur raid transpiring outdoors. Inside this stone building, I couldn't see the explosions peppering the skyline. But it was time to endure the final chaos, and face our grisly reality once more. Marcel slunk forward with caution, leading the way to the exit. The paranoid predator still hadn't lowered his gun.

Dino's ears perked up, and the beast projected a fearsome bark. The sudden noise, thunderous and throaty, nearly made me tip over from fright. The dog's hackle fur rose, and it began outright growling. I knew it all along; the vile predator was going to attack at random! I could feel my insides twisting, and my legs turning into paste.

"What is it, boy?" Marcel paused at the door, and turned his head toward the canine. "You hear something?"

"It's…r-ravenous. It's gone feral!" I screamed.

My best friend bit his lip with displeasure, holding back some snide remark. Dino cemented its insanity further, belting out a series of harsh barks. Marcel inched several steps back, and held up a hand for us to wait. Because of a dog's hunger fit, my human was wasting precious time!

I'm so sick of this non-sapient thing. It's dangerous, and I'm tired of the Terrans treating it like a pack member.

A dangerous thought crept into my mind, and I unclipped my sidearm. This was the perfect chance to put Dino down. It wouldn't win me any favor with Marcel, but I was already out of his good

graces. I coaxed my weapon up, and lined the sights on the animal. Its outburst gave me a suitable reason to be rid of it, at last.

Marcel was oblivious to my extermination plot; his gaze was following Dino's stare. Shadowy shapes moved up to the door, and I jerked my gun away from the dog. Its growling was drowned out by the sound of shattering glass. Gunfire tore through the door's opaque frame, and lanced into the room. The human sprinted back toward our position, holding onto Virnt.

"Arxur hostiles!" Marcel roared, terrifying Birla with his pitch. "Is there another exit?"

The grays shouldered through the broken frame, and took aim at anything that moved. This was a logical first stop on the raid, with an easy stash of eggs here; thousands of them. Unlike the ones helping in New York, these demons were here to wreak havoc. The fact that Marcel felt the need to tack 'hostiles' after Arxur…it was an insult to the Venlil's suffering.

I forced my claw onto the trigger. My bullet sailed in the direction of the grays, but it didn't connect with the monsters. Marcel's hand was on my shoulder in an instant. The human pushed me to the ground, and slid behind a chair. It warmed my petrified heart, to know that he'd still protect me in a battle.

Dino charged at the monstrosities, and sank its fangs into an Arxur thigh. The dog brought down the gray with ease, like it was wrangling a prey creature. One Dominion soldier attempted to rescue its colleague. However, the hasty shot missed the dog, and went through the downed Arxur's stomach instead.

The ugly mutt's charge had bought us time to regroup. If it hadn't detected the Arxur raiders, we would've been gunned down the second we stepped outside. Those vicious growls might've been a warning for us, just like Marcel assumed. I felt a tinge of regret for almost shooting it, though I shoved that emotion down.

"BIRLA!" Marcel waved a hand in front of the general's face. "Is there another exit?!"

The female Tilfish swallowed. "T-there's an emergency exit, t-to our left."

"Good. We move on three."

The human whistled to the dog, before popping shots off at the

Arxur to cover its retreat. The animal came running at Marcel's summons, and returned itself to my side. Dino was fresh out of close combat, sniffing my paw a bit too eagerly with its predatory snout. I ignored the beast, but I tried to suppress my innate resentment.

The grays dusted themselves off from the dog attack, and peppered our cover with bullets. The foam upholstery wasn't built to survive an assault; it was riddled with holes in seconds. This wasn't an actual shelter that could ward off the Arxur savages. Marcel gave the signal to move, and I indulged my instinct to run with gratitude.

The human dispensed a few hasty shots, giving us time to move. He lingered behind, all the while drawing the Arxur's attention. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw one monster buckle to the floor. My legs bolted for a side corridor, while my tail found itself drooping again.

Birla and I pressed up against the wall, with Dino skipping at our heels. It brought immeasurable relief to be huddled at a more secure location. However, that sensation was fleeting when I remembered the human. My eyes searched for him, and found his lanky form still crouched behind the chair.

Marcel had taken out another gray, but their raiding party could afford a few losses. The human was surrounded, and would be mowed down the instant he stood up. His hands cupped Virnt against his chest, gentle affection in his gaze. An unimaginable sense of loss gripped my heart, when I realized the primate was pinned down.

The thought of anything hurting Marc makes me weak at the knees. He's someone I love being around, and who I trust above all others.

"My human deserves to make it out of here," I muttered to myself.

My shaking paws became still, as that motivation spurred a return to my training. I poked my head out from behind the wall, and shouted for the Arxur's attention. Marcel widened his eyes, gesturing at his throat. There was no chance I'd let such a wonderful soul sacrifice himself for my sake! I did my best imitation of an injured squeal, fully earning the grays' attention.

The human stuffed Virnt in his helmet, and bolted toward my position. Barely aiming, I lobbed several shots at the Arxur. My newfound bravery fizzled out, as dozens of gluttonous pupils trained on me. The enemy guns swiveled away from their fellow

predator, and landed on the weak Venlil.

Pain lanced through my shoulder, like the muscles were torn from my arm. I fell backward as white-hot agony overwhelmed my senses. The Arxur nailed me with a bullet; did that mean I was dying? My panic intensified when sharp teeth pressed against my scruff. Dino dragged me behind the wall, and planted a slobbery lick on my mouth.

I screeched in disgust. “AWAY! G-gross.”

Marcel slid across the floor. “Slanek? No, no…are you okay? Answer me!”

“Leave. Please, just go. You have to get to your shuttle.”

The vegetarian tapped a wristband, which offered a readout of Terran numbers. It was illegible to my eyes, but I sensed that the information wasn’t a positive sight. A sad smile crossed his scarred face, and he breathed a half-hearted sigh. He deferred my firearm to Birla, before kneeling beside me.

“The countdown is at zero. Our evacuation ships already left.” Marcel hoisted me to my feet, and draped my good arm around his neck. “We’re stuck here.”

Utter defeat crushed my spirit, realizing we were stranded on a forsaken world. So this was how the unlucky soldiers felt on the cradle, fighting a hopeless fight. There was no escape from Sillis, and no humans coming back for us. With the Arxur swarming every settlement, our deaths were all but a guarantee.

Chapter 92

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 3, 2136

The shadow fleet disengaged from any direct confrontation with the Arxur. After protecting the warpers, aggression was not suitable to our survival. Padding the distance between us and the enemy was our first priority. Lighter Terran ships acted as a buffer, and drew the grays' attention with hit-and-run tactics. A gradual retreat occurred without substantive strikes from the arboreal predators.

From the fleetwide chatter, it sounded like the UN planned to sink their heels in for days. I didn't understand how prolonging this conflict's duration helped our cause. How long could any sapient maintain combat readiness for? Perhaps the humans were willing to drop dead of exhaustion if the grays bit the bullet too.

There's also the question of our warp fleet, and if they're coming back. Humans don't desert out of cowardice, do they?

I trusted that the Terrans had a plan at work, and that military flightiness was uncommon on Earth. There had never been a chance of holding Sillis, which was presently encircled by Arxur ships. This was about proving that humanity wouldn't go down with a whimper; the grays would have to claw for every nanoparsec.

Tyler clapped his Yotul pal on the shoulder. "Get us a quick visual on this asteroid. Shift back in the grays' direction afterward."

A space rock was making a pass close to Sillis (in astronomical terms) concurrent with the battle. The United Nations selected it as our cover to hunker down. This oblong body was conducive to defensive positioning, and it prevented the Arxur from targeting us at a distance. The grays were still following us into the great beyond, unwilling to let us escape. We needed a chance to outfox them.

To ensure our fortress held, we also deployed short-range FTL disruptors. The last thing humanity needed was for the enemy to warp in on our haunches, and mow us down without warning. Curiously, the Arxur hadn't enacted a similar barrier to stop our vessels from trying the same thing. Dominion ships might not

possess anti-FTL capabilities, since no foe had the gumption to drop atop them before.

Arxur craft had fanned out around the asteroid, attempting to swallow it whole. I got a brief glimpse of the crater-pocked surface, as Onso focused the viewport. Captain Monahan positioned us with a sightline around the asteroid, while keeping the ship frame nestled in its shadow. The Terran fleet unleashed a slew of kinetics alongside us. There was no rest for the weary during this fray.

I cleared my throat. “It appears that several grays have got their shields back up-and-running. We could use another round of shield-breakers, sir.”

“Already on it. Thankfully, our gunships stocked more than we expected to use,” Tyler replied.

“Okay, but why the fuck are the grays tailing us away from the target?” Carlos’ head snapped up from his transmission feed, and skepticism flashed in his eyes. “Isn’t their objective to take Sillis?”

“I think their objective is to teach us a lesson. Humans are a target because of Sillis, but it’s hardly about the territory anymore.”

I flexed my claws. “That’s a good thing. The Arxur *should* force us to make the first move. Instead, they waltz right into our gunfire.”

My eyes darted back to the sensors screen. Per the captain’s directive, I highlighted the specific ships taking the widest vectors to flank us. Those contacts would have optimal shot angles, and needed to be dispatched swiftly. Repelling the Arxur’s encroachment was going to be an arduous affair.

Electromagnetic missiles were ejected by the UN gunships, slotting into the enemy ranks. Unfortunately, we knew now that these wouldn’t cook their shielding mechanisms forever. Our weapons station took the downed defenses as a cue; humans could crank out kinetics in a hurry. I hoped I’d selected the correct targets to give us an edge.

Perfectly-timed bullets drowned one Arxur bomber, which was strafing aggressively to the near flank. Predator technicians swiveled our main turret to a new target without hesitation. The focus in a human’s eye still chilled me, since it revealed how singular their fixation on death could be. I wondered if such a dark ability was dormant within the Gojid genome, waiting to be

awakened.

“Sovlin! You’ve gone very quiet. Don’t zone out on me again!” Tyler snapped.

Samantha crossed her arms. “Oh, I bet he’s having one of his ‘woe is me’ moments.”

“I’m going to claw your tongue out.” I shot her a grouchy glare, before refocusing on my data. “Nothing to report, sir. But my eyes are peeled.”

The Terran fleet had room to maneuver behind the asteroid’s berth, whenever the grays got too close for comfort. Our reverse thrusters kicked into gear, steering us away from overzealous attackers. There was a fine line between defending ourselves and getting overrun. This wasn’t a mission of lofty ideals, like most I’d undertaken with the predators. This was about survival…and sticking around.

The Arxur can afford a couple dozen losses, if it means pinning our fleet down. Looks like they managed to land a few hits against us already.

The Dominion was applying pressure from all angles. A new wave of enemies crested over the asteroid’s peak, utilizing the third dimension. Plasma fire buffeted down on us, and the UN hastily matched the grays’ heading. My screen warned me of several target-locks, which left our vessel in a precarious position. We were climbing right into the firing line, where the Arxur wanted us.

“Change course now! We need evasive maneuvers!” I bellowed.

Monahan bared her teeth. “Drop our speed as quickly as possible, then gun it the way we came.”

Navigations brought us to a stall, ratcheting down from the steep climb. Power was diverted to slowing us down, and a bit of resistance slipped through the inertial dampeners. Our nose dipped back in the direction we came from, and I got a good look at our Terran allies. Several friendlies were retreating from the asteroid altogether, ditching any confrontation.

Onso spun the viewport toward the space below, allowing us to plot a safe course. An Arxur vessel blasted plasma toward us, right as we kicked the ship into overdrive. Navigations sent us into a barrel roll, and it was unclear if erratic movements would be enough. The energy beam sizzled past our former location, whiskers away from

singeing our tail.

That was a bit too close for comfort; even the human crew realized the severity of this fight. Arxur were closing in on us from three directions, and their numbers overwhelmed our limited forces. The asteroid wasn't large enough for us to spread out and mitigate fire. Not even "fellow predators" could avoid getting cornered by a conquest fleet.

Monahan frowned. "The UN just ordered a retreat. We're moving further away from Sillis, as quickly as possible. Time to find somewhere else to squat."

"What?!" Onso hissed. "We're falling back again? We might as well flee the system!"

"Knock it off!" Tyler nudged the Yotul with an elbow, chastising his impudence. "If the Captain tells you to fly the ship into a red dwarf, you fucking do it."

"This is dishonorable. If a Yotul herd was this outgunned, we'd concede the territory."

I shot him a smoldering stare. "And pray, what happens when you 'concede the territory?' What do the Arxur know of honor?"

"Nobody in this galaxy is honorable, including your 'benevolent' Federation. I thought humans had pride! We didn't defend Sillis, and we're not defending ourselves now."

"Some of us trust the predators' plan, uplift. We're taking as many grays with us as possible. Suck it up."

Tyler curled his fist. "ENOUGH! Mind your stations and *focus*, before we all get pulverized."

The Terran fleet had split up on several vectors, and forced the enemy to divide their pursuit as well. It was strange to see humans limping off like prey, licking their wounds. Our ship count was bleeding off dozens, as the Arxur got free potshots at our tails. Nearby UN vessels were picked off on the viewport, leaving debris in our vicinity.

The falling comrades encouraged our warship to pick up the pace; it was the stragglers that were most vulnerable. With caution thrown to the wind, we sped off well beyond the recommended velocity. Despite how our reserves were running thin, the humans dished out

a generous serving of missiles. Forcing the Arxur to intercept explosives distracted them from slaughtering us, though any damage sustained was surface-level.

I didn't care if I lived or I died, but there were others on this ship who retained meaning in their lives. Perhaps I'd been too harsh on Onso, who had a point about fleeing the system. This beatdown was a disappointing result for the Terrans, and I failed to see any grand scheme coming together. It could be human pride, refusing to admit defeat.

I would sacrifice myself to kill a few grays, but what about Sam and Carlos? It might be time to cut our losses, instead of seeing innocent humans suffer.

Plasma beams sizzled around us by the hundred. It didn't appear that humanity was putting up much of a fight; we were running for our lives. Should we escape the current chase, inviting another round was tantamount to suicide. Command's idea of stretching this out for days was a bizarre fantasy. Hell, we'd be lucky to take out a tenth of the Arxur fleet.

A powerful jolt shook the ship, as a beam connected with our rear quarters. My teeth rattled against my jaw bone, and I felt my brain lurch against my skull. Many human crew on their feet stumbled or hit the deck. Checking my datafeed, I saw that enough energy had seeped through the shields; there was a tear in our hull plating. Thankfully, key systems were unharmed, but the affected compartment would need to be sealed off.

Tyler narrowed his eyes. "Sovlin, report."

"Hull integrity is intact, sir. Damage is non-critical, but I suggest lowering our pace pronto. Our power *needs* to be invested in shields!" I pleaded.

"No can do. The quicker we get out of dodge, the better."

"With all due respect, we were lucky to survive that hit. The Arxur will want to finish us off now."

"Your concern is noted. What's the status of the human fleet overall?"

"We've lost about 200 ships in this push. Combine that with the losses we took out of the gate, and the warpers…we're barely fielding 400 ships. Not to mention, our forces split up now."

“Any good news? C’mon, man. I hope the enemy has a bloodied nose too.”

“And the Arxur ship count…the ones fighting us, anyways, is still hovering above 2000. Candidly, warping our ships out was stupid. It made the odds even worse.”

“So we’re just fucked,” Onso growled. “We sent away fighting resources, *and we’re fucked.*”

Carlos forced a tepid smile. “It’s not over? Humans have come back from worse.”

I diverted my attention from the bleak odds, and studied the predators one final time. To think that in my first encounter with them, I had thought them brutal deceivers that enslaved the Venlil. My words to Zarn, that humans must be irredeemable, couldn’t have been further from the truth. The prey aliens working alongside violent hunters was the good news Tyler asked for.

How could I explain that bonding and empathy were the positives? With Arxur munitions blitzing out around us, all I thought was how glad I was that humanity were in the picture. One battle loss wouldn’t define our future; this was just a setback in the predators’ scheme. My eyes drifted to the viewport, and watched the grays speeding after us.

Out of my periphery, I saw inbound subspace trails flash on my sensors screen. Terran ships blinked into existence a split-second later, and nipped at the Arxur’s right flank. They’d emerged from subspace without warning; the short jump left little time for detection. Munitions battered the enemy’s exposed side, hitting them from a perpendicular angle. The crazed humans had emerged from FTL already firing!

“Ambush the ambushers,” I muttered appreciatively. “But there’s not very many of them. Only twelve circled back?”

Looking closer at my screen, I reminded myself that the UN fleet had split up. The Arxur were forced to separate their numbers to follow each group, and that increased susceptibility to ambushes. More Terran vessels assisted other posses, simultaneous to our own rescue. That still didn’t account for the three-hundred ships that abandoned us; I counted less than a third of that tally in this jump.

The Arxur ships swiveled around to face the surprise attackers, and

focused on mowing them down with prejudice. The distraction allowed us to make a getaway, but Captain Monahan was ordering navigations to reverse course. The humans saw this as an opportunity to strike back, and our shadow fleet began advancing on the larger enemy.

Captain Monahan clasped her hands behind her back. “Find me some soft targets! The distracted ones, the clueless ones, the damaged ones: whatever works!”

I flicked my claws in acknowledgement, and leaned toward the viewport with focus. The Dominion had regained their bearings, with our small ambush no longer posing a threat. The filthy beasts decided that our manpower was inadequate, and I was inclined to agree with their assessment. However, just as the enemy turned to mop up the assailants, the humans pounced again.

A new wave emerged without any heads-up, this time surfacing on the rear flank. The primates weren’t holding anything back, unloading every munition type at their disposal. Opening another angle of attack caused disruption on two sides, and the Arxur’s organization suffered a rare lapse. Each Terran ambusher was scoring multiple casualties, while instilling widespread confusion.

The shadow fleet found new life, as we charged in to help our allies. I highlighted a heavily-damaged enemy for weapons to sweep up, growling with satisfaction. The numbers were still slanted against us, but the atmosphere on the bridge had shifted drastically. Our tiny band was making the enemy fall over themselves to shoot us.

Furthermore, the psychological advantage of paranoia couldn’t be understated. It was like walking through a predator-infested forest as a Gojid, and expecting a fanged beast to pop out of every bush. The Arxur had no clue whether there would be a third or a fourth attack. Warpers could come from any direction, including above or below. The galaxy’s apex predators were left chasing ghosts!

“All of the grays are on their heels, sir. I say we just hit whoever’s easiest to line up,” I chuckled.

Tyler dipped his head, before informing weapons to fire freely. I confirmed with my sensors readout that a hundred warpers still hadn’t returned; there had to be one more ambush coming. My prediction was that it would come from above, since Terrans hadn’t utilized the third dimension yet. Any unoccupied Arxur were

keeping wary guns trained at the sky, rather than at our battered fleet. It seemed that the monsters shared my speculation.

But humans weren't prone to predictability, as evidenced by the ships' actual appearance. Their warp point was either predator derangement or instinctual brilliancy; my jaw almost hit the floor. Sleek silver bodies were birthed from the void, and their play wasn't to swoop in on any sensible heading. The psychotic primates warped out right in the middle of the Arxur fleet.

Those vessels are surrounded by enemies, with no possible escape! They have no time to orient themselves either…it's a miracle if they don't crash.

The last Terran warpers spread themselves out amid Arxur ranks, and took no time to collect themselves. Ruthless in victory's pursuit, these primates emptied their missile bays upon re-entry. The grays were adept at intercepting projectiles, but this was an unexpected barrage at point-blank range. From where only friendly ships had been, humans were ramming missiles down their throats.

The Arxur had stopped coordinating with their comrades, and hurled blind fire at the infiltrators instead. That tactic did connect with some Terran interlopers, but friendly fire was a more common outcome. The weapons station prepared our own explosives with renewed vigor. We knew the grays were preoccupied, so this was our best chance of dodging their defenses.

Captain Monahan snarled at the viewport. "Give it everything we've got! We need to finish them."

The grays' ship count had been sliced in half, since the ambush commenced. The shadow fleet was dishing out considerable damage, with alternating plasma and kinetics. The warpers padded our numbers, and sailed with a recklessness that was unmistakably human. No other species could wreak such havoc with so few assets.

It was akin to a blood frenzy, with humans chucking armor-piercing shells to increase their kills. The Arxur had no shields to resist the onslaught, and their numbers were evening out with ours. These grays were in a desperate retreat; it had taken a heavy toll to stave off our ambush. Granted, there were more enemies camped at Sillis, but this fight was becoming level.

Our plasma railgun got off a few volleys, and complimented our diverse explosives. The ambush had been swift and decisive; the Arxur were torn apart from their heart. A few hundred enemies hobbled off in shell-shock, and sought protection from Sillis' raiders. The impossible speed at which this turnaround transpired had my head spinning.

What sane race would trap themselves with their enemies? The results were undeniable, but no prey military could replicate human efficacy. It was astounding how Terrans conjured up novel tactics with ease, showing off unparalleled cunning. I couldn't reconcile the caring species I knew with the deviousness they honed in battle.

Onso gawked at the viewport. "I misspoke. Humans are standing up for themselves…quite well."

"That's who we are. We're the ones who run out of bullets, and fix bayonets," Carlos rumbled. "We don't go down without a fight."

I chewed at my claws. "You would never surrender?"

"I didn't say that. I said not without resisting…and not to a merciless enemy. Certainly not to *them*."

"The grays don't put their prisoners in luxury spas," Samantha quipped. "Predator or not, I wouldn't want to be their plaything."

The Terran fleet mulled around our current location; pursuit of the Arxur wasn't an objective. Considerable enemies were amassed by Sillis, with an initial tally of six thousand strong. The UN defensive line was a mere quarter of that, so it was unclear how the Earthlings could terminate the siege. It wouldn't be possible to pull warp tricks within the FTL-disruption boundary, either.

This engagement proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the UN was not weak; the Arxur would respect the primates' forces in the future. But the Terrans had to decide whether it was worth it to liberate Sillis. Our position was ripe with disadvantages, and we might not have much energy left in the tank.

If humans truly didn't go down without a fight, perhaps it was time to 'fix bayonets.' We'd need a lot more cunning and spite in a hurry.

Chapter 93

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 4, 2136

Once the Terrans realized I was awake, intelligence officers interrogated me from outside my cell. I spilled more than I should have perhaps, given how little Zhao cared for saving the Arxur. Cooperation with the humans was the only way to prove I was on their side. It was foolish to assume that their government could discern my intentions, after chaos ravaged their power structures.

But I couldn't stop thinking of Elias Meier, and his devotion to a better future. There had to be other humans out there who understood me; I just needed to discover a way to reach them. One of mankind's most interesting aspects was their branching opinions. Someone had to understand that the reasoning, dictating that I was an enemy, was flawed.

My actions should speak my intentions. If the Zurulians explained their story, it would at least prove that I was NOT planning on eating them.

My acute hearing dialed in on footsteps down the hall, and I put on a collected exterior. It was a shame anger had gotten the better of me; I shouldn't have threatened the Secretary-General, no matter how heated our dialogue was. That certainly didn't prove that I was a peaceable guy. The Terran interrogators had taken those threats seriously, and kept outside of the cell.

After all, they couldn't muzzle me if they wanted me to talk, right? The humans knew that I could kill them with a single bite. I wished I could prove that I was a predator of their caliber, not an animal like the prey believed. This newcomer approaching my cell would peer through the window like all the rest; I was a museum exhibit as much as a prisoner.

"Hello?" I raised my voice, hoping this human could hear me. "I am not your enemy. How do I prove that?"

My cell door clanged open, and an American general wearing camouflage strode in. The dust-colored hair suggested this was General Jones; she seemed unconcerned by my presence. There were no restraints to keep me from lunging at her, or overpowering

her. Interest sparked in my brain, as she turned her back to me. The lack of fear was a stark difference from my earlier visitors.

The primate moved a chair up beneath a camera, and hopped atop the support. Jones switched the recording device off, her flimsy fingers finding the buttons with ease. Why did she not want this interaction on tape? Her demeanor didn't suggest that she intended to torture me; that would be inadvisable in my unfettered state.

Confidence shone in Jones' green eyes, as she seated herself right across from me. I kept my maw closed tightly, and listened for her eventual declaration. The human leaned forward, lowering her voice to a hushed whisper.

"Isif, I tried to get you to leave. I didn't want to bring you in like this," Jones said.

My nostrils flared. "What? You knew this would happen?"

"You and Zhao both acted exactly as I predicted. You have a lot in common, but I digress. I don't have much time, so I'm going to make this quick."

"Good. I'm listening."

"I wanted to establish contact with you for awhile, but you must not talk to Earth so directly in the future. You are going to get yourself killed. Honestly, it's a good thing that we can have a proper conversation in here."

I studied the human with narrowed eyes. This was quite different from her hostility on the call, when she rebuked me at every turn. Jones spoke as though she was already aware that I was an asset. It made no sense why she'd allowed my capture, if that were true. Nonetheless, this message returned a glimmer of hope.

"Killed? No, human, I'm good at what I do. I've managed not to wind up dead for decades," I growled.

Jones flashed her teeth. "Oh Isif, we both know you're not subtle. You have a conversation with Shaza, and then *immediately* go to Earth? How would you explain that if an Arxur followed your trail?"

"I would say I threatened you at length to turn over Sillis."

"For all you know, Shaza bugged your ship. You're her rival, and she might suspect your motives already. She tells Giznel you're

lying, and bam, you're dead."

"I see your point."

"Shit, I'm glad you didn't say anything self-incriminating on our hail. I was trying to stop you from spilling the beans. For your sake, Isif, I will suggest ways to contact us on the down low, going forward."

The Terran general extended her hand, and dropped a tooth extension on the table. Jones pointed to her weak canines, then at my snout. I considered what she was asking for a moment, before popping the crown onto my chipped tooth. The Dominion considered it weakness to fix fangs, since those marks were hunting souvenirs. However, I could worry about that aspect at another time.

Jones leaned back in her seat. "There's a hard drive inside that crown. Dead drop locations and codes; as well as a full lesson on spycraft."

"So then…you know I'm an asset. Was all this really necessary?" I huffed.

"I'm afraid so. The amount of folks on Earth who know you're a human sympathizer? I can count them on two hands, and they're all part of 'Five Eyes.' It's better that way."

"I do not know what you're referring to. But if I understand, the Secretary-General doesn't know about me? You don't trust Zhao?"

"It's not so simple. Zhao would want to keep records of your role, accessible to a lot more eyes, and he would demand that we keep tabs on you. He might risk your welfare for short-term gain, or even blackmail you into going further than you are willing. Whereas I… see your full value."

I narrowed my eyes to slits. "I'm not some Venlil that can be pushed around. I'd like to see him try to 'blackmail' me. Besides, would it be such a bad thing to have my allegiance documented?"

"The less people who know your true loyalties, the better. We don't know how many breaches occurred while Arxur roamed Earth, or whether the Dominion can access our databases. I'm protecting you from our insufficiency, because I know we can't safeguard you yet."

"And this is why Meier did not speak of me?"

“Well, I can’t exactly ask him that, Isif. But Meier was always a big picture guy, and I’d wager he clued at least one person in. Someone he trusted.”

I lashed my tail against the floor, taking a moment to process her words. If Secretary-General Zhao was oblivious to my actual agenda, that meant he was serious about locking me up forever. That also meant his aggravating behavior wasn’t a performance; he believed I was a Zurulian-eating fiend that plotted against Earth.

How did General Jones plan to secure my release? Of the billions of humans in existence, fewer than ten were briefed on my identity. I wasn’t sure how to feel about the cybersecurity concerns, or the assumptions on how Zhao would extort me. She also implied that I wasn’t supposed to convince the United Nations of my fealty at all.

I feel like I’m owed an apology in all of this. I’ve gone out of my way to help humans, and as an Arxur, I despise insults.

“Listen, I’m sure Zhao’s words don’t sit right with you. It’s not really his fault,” Jones continued. “A US cyber division cracked Arxur communications this week. That transcript? My people wiped anything that would give you away to the larger intelligence community.”

A growl rumbled in my throat. “Nice going. So I guess it’s totally okay that he had me tranquilized like a monster.”

“Zhao is paranoid about further attacks on Earth; his home nation represented *twenty percent* of the total death tally. His famous speech’s tagline was ‘not one more’, referring to civilian casualties, and I can’t say I disagree. He’s willing to protect our home at all costs, and that includes against Arxur plots.”

“Whatever, human. You said we have little time, so I’ll save my scathing remarks for another date. I presume the transcript is how you found out I’m on your side?”

“Isif, please; you continually underestimate us. We’ve been monitoring you since you set foot in New York. Every conversation, behavior, and holopad search was surveilled.”

“…I see.”

“We’ve got your back, buddy. It’s up to you what you want to do next. If you’re doing this for a better tomorrow, great. If you just want glory and our adoration, don’t bother. Nobody will know your

name or what you've done; not as a spy."

"I am not here for pride. I just want the centuries of death to be stopped. But how long must I slink around for?"

"That is also up to you. If you pull rank and use food as a motivator, I imagine your fleet would follow you in rebellion." General Jones met my gaze with a knowing smirk. "You could offer refuge to those targeted by Betterment too."

"Don't play coy. Could I count on human support?" I prodded.

"Only superficially. We don't want war with the entire Dominion if it's avoidable. We'd prefer to keep the fight against a single warlord."

"Right."

"The choice to start an open rebellion is irreversible, so I'm giving you options. You don't *have* to stick your neck out."

I contemplated her words in silence, knowing full well the risks of insurrection. As cowardly as Terran espionage sounded, my own verdict was that Arxur revolutionaries weren't ready. Preparation for an uprising would increase our odds, and humanity might become amenable to our cause. I couldn't fault Earth's non-interference, when I'd mused myself that a two-front war would be a steep task.

The humans are new to the galaxy, and they're assaulting the Federation already. It's better to bide our time, at least a little.

I slammed my paw on the table. "We'll do it your way. Now get me out of here, Jones. You're gonna bust me out, right?"

The American general had the gall to laugh. "No, God, no. I'm not going to openly oppose Zhao. Someone else is going to order your release. Don't worry, she's already landed."

"Who? Erin Kuemper from Alien Affairs? Sara Rosario, *Odyssey* officer?"

"I might've suggested that Governor Tarva come to facilitate the Zurulian rescues' return. She'll want to see the Arxur we captured."

"Tarva. Fucking Tarva?! That's your plan?!"

"Yes. I thought you two were on good terms?"

"Tarva is a Venlil, for fuck's sake!" I roared. "I *do* like her. But the

second a human says it was all a ruse, just Arxur deceit for long-term suffering, she'll be happy to believe it."

General Jones smiled. "For someone who supposedly is open-minded, you think quite lowly of the Venlil. Try having a little faith."

"Faith? Faith! Are you fucking insane? Tarva will never believe me. I wouldn't even hold it against her."

"Ah, and they're coming. Guess that means our time is up. Good luck."

I curled my lip at the human, before turning my head dismissively. Jones scrambled to put the camera back on, and hurried out of the room. I hoped the primate had another plan, when the Tarva maneuver blew up in her face. It was disheartening to think the progress I'd made with the Venlil leader would be undone, for the sake of my cover.

Claws clicked across the floor, tailed by the shuffles of dress shoes. Renewed anger surged through my veins, as I detected Zhao's gravelly cadence. But I couldn't hold a grudge against the Secretary-General if he had an incomplete set of facts. This wasn't any time to get emotional.

I inhaled deeply, and relaxed my facial muscles to look calm. Given that I did respect Governor Tarva, it was worth an honest effort at convincing her. At least I could say I tried to win her over, and that I kept a level head throughout our encounter. Perhaps one day I'd point to that fact to repair our relations.

Hurtful accusations were bound to fly from the Venlil leader; I steeled myself for the insults that were looming. Only a defective Arxur would feel anything at betrayal, since we weren't supposed to care what others thought of us. It was foolish of me to have any emotions toward a prey animal, knowing that she saw me as a tool. Tarva played at diplomacy because she wanted her planet to be left alone.

"…believe an Arxur w-would have the bravado to fly at Earth." The Venlil's squeaky voice hit my ears, carrying far due to its pitch. "Those Zurulians are lucky you were able to rescue them."

Zhao's footsteps came closer. "This guy is very high up the ladder too; we got him before he could turn on humans. He was boasting

about using us. Right in that cell there."

I rose to my paws, watching as the Venlil moved up to the window pane. Fear was visible in her side-facing eyes, despite the barrier between us. Her pupils managed to lock on me, and shock trickled through her expression. That erased any doubt that Tarva *could* recognize me, rather than assuming all Arxur looked the same.

"C-Chief Hunter Isif?" To my amazement, the Venlil whirled around with an assertive posture. "Why the fuck would you arrest Isif?"

"I just told you. He's manipulating us into fighting the Arxur's battles, then planning to subjugate us all once it's done," Zhao answered. "It's what he says behind closed doors. We couldn't let him spy on Earth."

Tarva swiveled back to the glass. "Isif, is any of t-that true? You really speak like that…t-to the other grays? And you had those sickly Zurulians on your ship?"

This is hopeless. There's no way she'll believe me.

"Yes, to both," I sighed. "But I was trying to stop Shaza from attacking the humans, without being killed for treason. I rescued those Zurulians from her farm at great personal risk."

Not that you care, I added silently.

It took a colossal effort to force a stoic expression. The Venlil backed away from the window, and I resigned myself to her fleeing in disgust. Governor Tarva was open-minded for speaking with me at all; few in the Republic would support her hearing my side of the story. I appreciated that gesture as a sign of respect.

The door clicked open without warning, and an alarmed Secretary-General rushed after Tarva. The Venlil had unlocked my cell from the outside; to my amazement, she seemed to be letting me out. My maw dropped with shock. Why would a prey ruler trust the word of an Arxur?

The Governor flicked her ears. "Let Isif go, right now. Whatever favors I am owed by humanity, I'm calling them in."

"What are you doing?" Zhao tugged the Venlil back, and hastily shut the door. "You can't possibly believe that story! What he said to Shaza—"

"…was theatrics so he wouldn't get executed. Isif wants an end to

the war and to cattle farming. Meier told me that much, and yes, I trust him with my life."

Elias Meier didn't forsake me. Jones was right, and Prophet, maybe she guessed who he told from the start.

Secretary-General Zhao gaped at Tarva. "Have you considered that Elias was confused, or deceived himself?"

"Not at all. Meier's dying wish was for me to make peace with the Arxur," she responded. "As he bled out in my arms, *that* was what he asked. He was a good man."

"I'm sorry for your loss. But you cannot trust the grays; you know that. We ran empathy tests on every Arxur we captured at the cradle, and not a one passed."

"Isif is different."

"You have no evidence to support that! The science says the Arxur are a sociopathic race. You know how many human volunteers failed the empathy test? Zero."

"Individual results can vary. You have your people with predator disease."

"But it would be different if every soldier was a sociopath. I don't think this is a test a *high-ranking Dominion officer* can pass."

"But Isif will pass, Zhao. What does it hurt to humor me? Give him the test, and if he passes, you'll let him go with me."

There was a long silence, as the human stared down the prey leader. The Secretary-General offered a reluctant nod at last, and called for guards to transport me to the lab. Despite Zhao's stubbornness, he seemed unwilling to alienate the Venlil. I was shocked that Tarva had fought for me, and I couldn't fathom how to express my gratitude. Politeness wasn't a field I had any practice in.

I decided to comply with the human escort, embracing the conditions of my release. It was ironic that my defectiveness would bolster my standing with the United Nations. Perhaps General Jones would peek at the results too, to ensure I hadn't pulled a long con on her. The empathy test was the least of my concerns; instead, I was worried how the Terrans fared against Shaza.

The pack predators had wormed their way back into my thoughts again. I wanted to ensure their continued survival, now more than

ever. Knowing that Meier's final request was about the Arxur's future renewed my trust in his kind. Humanity was interested in reforming our society, and I could guide them to an age of prosperity.

Chapter 94

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 4, 2136

The empathy tests were an assortment of prey species facing torment. For the first time since childhood, I leaned into my defective voice. It was painful to allow myself to feel fully, without casing those primal sensations in a shell of logic. Witnessing unnecessary suffering elicited a shameful amount of pity, just as it had back at Shaza's farm. Now, more than ever, I knew herbivores were not just spineless animals.

The look on Secretary-General Zhao's face, as his scientists explained my results, was vindicating. The human leader did honor his agreement with Tarva, permitting me to board her ship. I was surprised the Venlil leader wanted me confined with her for hours; from what I could tell, she carried no firearms. Shouldn't a prey individual expect me to snap on a whim, and thus not want me seated across from her?

I rested in a brooding state, mostly keeping to the co-pilot's seat in the cockpit. Governor Tarva sensed my sour mood, and allowed us to travel in silence. It made for an awkward ride, with the rescued Zurulians in the cabin behind us. The Venlil possessed more patience than myself, coaxing the quadrupeds to indulge in basic self-care. Her constant reassurance and crooning tone grated on my nerves, whenever she ventured back to their locale.

"Thank the Prophet we're almost to Venlil Prime." My pupils snapped toward Tarva, as she returned to the cockpit once more. "How the fuck did the humans survive all these exchange programs?"

The governor shot me a disapproving look. "Have some sympathy. Those three were literally just captured and brought to a farm, where your lovely comrades threatened to eat them."

"I do have sympathy. I didn't want them to be eaten, did I?"

"Never mind, Isif. You can have this ship when we get to my homeworld. If my people saw me riding with you…"

“I appreciate your assistance, Governor Tarva. I too considered Elias Meier a friend and an ally. Even with his intervention, the fact that you would listen to an Arxur is not lost on me.”

The Venlil was silent for a long moment, and her ears pinned back with a meek emotion. Her limbs weren’t quivering, so I wasn’t inclined to label it fear. Though it was tough to read prey cues, my best guess was that it was grief. Sadness swirled in her irises, before she looked at me with something bordering contempt.

Tarva cleared her throat. “I know you have done…have presided over horrible things, Isif. Genocides, raids, and systematic slaughtering. Your motivation to avoid your own execution doesn’t change that.”

“You are right. I see why my statements about not assigning responsibility can be perceived as callous. Please, do not take my detachment as a sign that I do not regret my culpability.”

“Didn’t you order the raid on the cradle? The Gojids are an endangered species because of you.”

“Someone else would’ve done it if not me, yes? But it was me, and at the time…I believed coexistence was not possible. My beliefs have since shifted.”

Governor Tarva was silent, scowling at the viewport. The Gojid cradle was intended to be like any other raid; with their border defenses down, it made a frontal assault tantalizing. I hadn’t known why the defenses were offline until later, when reports from the planet’s surface circled back to me. Another predator race taking on the Federation…it was too good to be true!

We’d be alone for so long. I was certain it would be disproved, I mused. *Then, humanity took the cradle back from us. The sheer guts! The audacity!*

The Terrans bested us fair and square, allegedly using Venlil ships in their arsenal. It baffled me that they worked hand-in-hand with prey, but that led to my deduction of humanity’s social nature. Intrigued by these specific aliens, I aimed to learn more about them. A new predator opened up avenues with their presence; it meant someone else wasn’t indoctrinated by the Federation’s spiel.

Looking back at the Gojid cradle through Tarva’s lens, I realized how differently humans viewed our first meeting. Planetary raids

instilled very little guilt after all these years; it was something I deigned not to dwell on. What would Nulia think, if she learned "Siffy" was behind the "bad monsters'" arrival? How many children like her had I doomed to cattle farms?

One of the last things Elias Meier did was convince the Mazics to aid the Gojid refugees. From what I'd heard, the Zurulians and the Paltans took in a handful as well. The spiky herbivores had limited numbers now, and Earth was in no place to be offering asylum. The United Nations had lifted their protection of Gojid colonies, which led many survivors to flee.

"The Gojids were a sad case, Tarva. I did give those orders; I'm not dodging responsibility. I understand that my past actions have been hurtful," I offered.

"You don't know hurtful. You took my daughter." The Venlil leader's voice quavered, and she shoved me with shocking aggression. "YOU TOOK MY DAUGHTER! It was you. You ordered the grays to gas Venlil s-schools: what, to crush our morale?!"

"I…I am sorry. I had no idea that you were personally affected by our raids, and you do not deserve that. Whether I directly ordered this instance or not, the Arxur who did it reported to me. They were under my command. I took no actions against routine attacks, certainly nothing to draw suspicion."

"It was just 'routine', huh? I fucking know you feel empathy, and you could've done things differently. Why did you have to be so cruel?!"

"I will not disrespect you by making excuses for myself. If there was any way I could undo the past, I would, Tarva. But I cannot. Your hatred and inability to forgive me, it is understandable."

The Venlil governor swiped at the tears in her eyes, and I felt a strange urge to place my tail on her shoulder. My logical brain reminded me I was the last person she'd want comfort from. Most species loved their children, referencing their loss as the greatest pain imaginable; that was why the Dominion learned to target the youth. Perhaps if my nurturing instincts had been cultivated better, I could understand.

Tarva cleared her throat. "I am willing to work with you, but I will never forgive you. I cannot forget what you've done."

“Your animosity is justified. My only atonement is to pave a better future, so that this will not happen again,” I hissed. “That is my sincere hope…I will do everything in my power to protect Venlilkind.”

“You must’ve had a difficult life, Isif. To never be allowed to express your emotions, forced to fit in with despicable people. You deserve a friend. I just cannot be that friend, even if Elias would’ve wanted me to.”

“Silly leaf-licker. No prey will befriend me. The Zurulian mishap proved that, yes?”

“In real life, sure. It would be best if they didn’t know who you are. You can talk anonymously on the internet though. General Jones gave me this holopad over here, said you’d ‘want it back.’”

“Seriously Tarva? You think that holopad is meant to join…some Federation chatroom? I have nothing in common with you people!”

“That’s just my advice. I think it would be good for you to understand us ‘hunting-challenged’ races better. To express your empathetic side, and not to be alone.”

I offered a dramatic huff, and turned away from Tarva to reinforce my disdain. My paws did snatch the holopad, though I was suspicious that General Jones may have tampered with it. The Terran officer had returned my standard-issue device as well; I inspected it closely. Whatever purposes I used these electronics for, I should be certain I was okay with humans viewing them.

Governor Tarva was attempting to be empathetic, but her suggestion was lunacy. What good would it be to get attached to a prey alien, when I might have to kill and butcher their kind later? What had relaxing my guard around Nulia accomplished? All discourse with the herbivores resulted in was guilt.

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Hours later, alone on the ship with my thoughts, I set course for my spy station. Governor Tarva bade me farewell, after supplying me with meat rations from the local factories. Knowing the Venlil’s anti-carnivore values, the generosity of that offering couldn’t be understated. I wondered if this was the start to building a bridge of trust. We would never be friends, but partnership wasn’t out of the question.

That was all a moot point, if I didn't return to commanding my sector. Arxur were solitary creatures, who cared little for others' welfare. However, if I didn't check in soon, the Dominion would start asking questions for practical reasons. I needed to drum up an explanation for why I'd lost my own vessel, and returned in a Venlil transport.

Perhaps the humans' tooth drive could help you. Why haven't you given it more than a cursory glance?

Instead of crafting my story, I was learning how to navigate through the Federation internet. Passing close to our FTL backdoor with Mileau, the Dossur homeworld, I'd been able to establish a connection. As small rodents, the Dossur weren't at the top of our meal list; they were the "least valuable" species in my sector. Their territory bordered Gojid space, but on the opposite side from the Zurulians.

"Stupid Tarva," I growled aloud. "Putting stupid ideas in my defective brain. How did she know that I wanted that?!"

The Dossur had a social media site called SwiftPair, which would randomly assign anonymous users to chat. The rodents had few abilities beyond jabbering to each other, so of course they'd devise such a platform. Then again, humans had a propensity to run their mouths about nonsense too. That was just how desperate social creatures were for belonging.

My traitorous claw hovered over the "Pair" button, and I cursed myself. Perhaps I should just let Tarva's recommendation backfire, so I could move on. Honestly, what harm could a single chat do? I could always intimidate the little critter away if they became a nuisance.

I clicked the button, and the algorithm found a chat partner in a half-second. The public profile classified this Dossur as a mid-twenties female located on a space station.

Hi, I typed hesitantly.

How's it going? Please tell me you're not just on here to flirt, came the instant reply. *I swear, it's like this became a dating app overnight.*

What? I don't know why I'm here, but it's certainly not for that.

Good, 'cause I will block you if you're lying. So I'm Felra, and I'm a spaceship inspector. Catching every slapstick, half-assed repair job the

human alliance throws at us.

You work with humans?

Not directly. We just let their allies marshal some forces at the old Fed spots. The UN is talking about an exchange program, but we're the smallest species in the galaxy. Problematic.

There was a pause, before the Dossur typed another message. *What's your name?*

Nerves crept into my throat. Not only did I have little clue how to sustain conversation with an herbivore, but my real name was infamous. Word must've gotten around about the sector's Chief Hunter, after my broadcast on Earth. It wasn't like I could tell Felra that I was an Arxur; it would stop her little heart, assuming she believed me.

Siffy, I decided.

That's adorable! You must get that a lot, but props to your parents.

I do not wish to discuss my parents.

Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. What do you do for a living, Siffy?

"I bomb planets, execute people for empathy, and farm sapients," I quipped aloud.

This and that, was the actual reply I sent her. *Nothing you'd be interested in.*

Felra typed back hastily. *You don't talk about much, do you? You're prickly as a Gojid.*

I'm not…used to talking. This was a mistake…I deserve to be alone.

This was a waste of time; I reprimanded myself for indulging these urges. There was no telling how the humans were faring at Sillis, and I needed to check back in with the Dominion fleet soon. Rather than making preparations, I was chatting with a creature that resembled an Earth 'mouse.' Had the loneliness really been this crippling for all these years?

A banner popped up on the app, indicating that Felra sent a friend request. I had no clue what was going through that Dossur's tiny brain, but she must've been meaning to block me. As I prepared to fire up my Arxur communicator, I made out the rodent's next message. It read, "No one deserves to be alone."

Snorting in amusement, I accepted the request before dipping offline. General Jones should've kept this Terran holopad, so I wouldn't get sidetracked on preylike pastimes. The human officer knew I was defective, and didn't take precautions to suppress these tendencies. Wasn't that what she meant about getting myself killed?

There was no guarantee Felra would respond to future messages, but I wasn't going to squander more time. With my direct course for the spy habitat, the Arxur Dominion required notification of my vehicle change. I entered my credentials, before pinging my headquarters. The day-long absence made it likely I'd be in contact with the brass, rather than my underlings.

It was time to put on the façade for our government, and resume my role as Isif the fanatic.

Prophet-Descendant Giznel accepted my video call. "Is there a reason you've been avoiding your check-ins, Isif? For a less-faithful hunter, I would have you executed."

"Your Savageness, I take it you know that I visited Earth. Shaza is a fool, and your wise decree was for us to settle the dispute," I explained. "The humans may have seen the wisdom of standing down…yet alas, I was too late to accomplish that."

"You disappeared for a full day. I doubt both your conviction and your loyalty, Isif. You are not willing to kill the humans, are you?"

"That's absurd! I am gathering intelligence on Earth, in case we need to fight the leaf-licking apes. I don't care about humans. I want Betterment imposed on the galaxy, at any cost. Hallowed Prophet, they can learn to drink from the river of cruelty! You knew this yourself!"

It was unclear whether Giznel believed my argument, but he had opted not to kill me on sight. The Prophet-Descendant could be convinced of diplomacy's usefulness; as long as I was strengthening our cause, I was safe. The alarming part was his overt accusation that I was a human conspirator. Betterment had been partial to me for years, and this development meant I couldn't hide behind favoritism.

The Arxur leader narrowed his eyes. "That is not your ship you're streaming from, either. Is that…"

"Yes, I made off with prey technology. The humans found tactical

advantages commandeering Venlil ships," I growled. "I will dissect the design, because those grass-brains aren't worthy of killing us. If war is inevitable, the Dominion will be ready."

"We pay Venlil technology the respect of studying it now?"

"I want our glory, Savage One. Our victory must be resounding, and prove our superiority."

"You are straying from the path, Isif. But you were right about humans being formidable foes."

"Is that so? Nobody agreed with me before. I have missed something from Sillis and Fahl, yes?"

Giznel scrutinized me for another second, before swiping at his holopad. The compilation contained distress signals from across Shaza's sector, which were sent through our FTL networks. Farm habitats forwarded footage of humans raiding our facilities, and undefended stations being reduced to rubble. The Terrans severed our comms infrastructure shortly after these transmissions.

The UN could've cut the proverbial wire earlier. They want the Arxur government…and Shaza to see this.

Laughter rumbled in my chest, as I realized the UN's true strategy. The humans used the occupied worlds as bait, and Chief Hunter Shaza played into their hands. That foolish Arxur was so eager to teach the "weaklings" a lesson, that she hadn't guarded her most valuable possessions. Every strategic asset and supply depot across hundreds of light-years was erased.

"This amuses you?" Giznel hissed.

I bared my teeth. "Shaza's incompetence brings me nothing but joy. Does she know yet?"

"Word is reaching her around the same time as us. She will be made aware soon, but I have to deal with her mess now."

"Ah, don't bail her out! This was her great master plan, after all. I know how to handle humans, and I need your trust going forward."

"You can hardly fuck up worse. I'll humor your weird ideology, Isif, but I'm watching you."

The Prophet-Descendant terminated the call, and left me to chew on his words. My first conversation as an official human spy, and I already had Giznel sniffing around my business. This was going to

require me to operate more carefully; the freedom I'd enjoyed in the past had waned. General Jones was right to warn me about eyes and ears everywhere.

My gaze drifted to the Terran holopad, which sat in the cockpit. Browsing alien internets was perilous too, unless I could find a suitable cover. With my actions under a microscope, talking with a Dossur inspector was a fool's errand. Felra shouldn't occupy my thoughts, since I'd only be able to sneak sporadic messages at best.

How long could I hide my Arxur identity from her? What if I have more in common with prey than my kind?

I shook my head. The future of the galaxy was at stake; this was no time for emotional baggage. It took a weight off my shoulders, to know that the humans punched back from Sillis. A straight-up fight had been inadvisable, but Shaza's arrogance was her undoing. I would pay a pretty penny to see the look on her face, when she discovered her empire had collapsed.

My goal was to ensure that humanity's war remained with a single warlord. However, keeping Betterment off their backs might prove to be a challenge.

Chapter 95

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: December 4, 2136

The memories trickled through my brain, as a deep chill rattled my body. I was disoriented and immobile, uncertain of my surroundings. The current time and location were indeterminable; haziness obscured my conscious thoughts. My mind reached out for context, in an attempt to ground myself.

We had been caged in the Tilfish nursery; I was shot during the fray. Marcel had propped me up, ignoring the strain on his own body. Orange blood flowed onto his chest pelt, and perspiration beads coated his skin. Dino tagged along, whimpering as my eyes began to turn glassy. Virnt was back in Birla's arms, asking why the Venlil was leaking.

We were a ragtag band, stranded on Sillis. I remembered now.

The grays had been hot on our heels, and we hobbled toward the emergency exit. My vision was fixed on the floor tiles, which were mired with my dripping blood. General Birla urged Virnt to cover his ears, as she dispensed my firearm at the Arxur. I think the carnivores refrained from gunning us down, because they wanted to capture us alive.

There was more. We had to get to the emergency exit, didn't we? Why is it all slipping out of reach?

"Shoot me," I had coughed at Marcel. "Save yourselves…please, brother."

The predator refused to let go, bending his arm tighter around my torso. Tiredness threatened to consume me, as the vegetarian popped errant shots over his shoulder. Images flitted through my brain, from various moments of time; that forced snarl was his classic empathy rendition. That same expression had consoled me when Sovlin held him at gunpoint.

Not too long ago, I'd been feeding the half-dead Terran by hand. Amid the chaos, I recalled hoping that Marcel knew how much I cared about his welfare. There were terrible screams, both near and afar, which sent my heart pounding. Despite all of the nightmares

we had endured, I wouldn't change a thing about our partnership. Even if Marcel was losing patience with me, I hoped he still felt our bond.

Think Slanek. The screams. There was something there.

Those had been Tilfish screams, as the incubator workers came running in droves. Our hasty escape hadn't given me time to don blinders; I'd seen it all. The civilians distracted our Arxur pursuers, stampeding past them at full speed. As much as the grays wanted a Venlil delicacy, this easy meal toppled into their laps.

Our ragtag band stumbled out into fresh air, and I was wholly leaning on Marcel for support. There were more Arxur in the street. I think that was the memory in its entirety; I'd glued the pieces back together. We needed to find somewhere to take cover…to take…

Birla clicked her mandibles in the backdrop. "Slanek? Slanek, you have to keep your eyes open."

I drew a gasping breath, and my pupils snapped to my arm. Judging by the dark hue and the profuse leakage, the bullet hit a vein. There was a wet sensation on my hindlegs; at first, I worried it was blood from my wound. However, the realization that the brick tunnel we were in was a rotting mess ensued. A few inches of murky liquid amassed across the floor. Perhaps this was a sewer system underground?

My addled brain shook off the stupor, and I searched for Marcel's comforting presence. I scanned every shadow for the lurking human. This wasn't the first time the predator had been around my blood, so I knew that he could handle the alluring scent. On Sovlin's ship, I'd been immobile with a head wound, and locked in an enclosed cell without food. Even then, the human had cared about my welfare.

There was no reason a vegetarian who loved rescuing animals should need to get away from blood. Humans weren't drawn to it like the Arxur; I'd never seen them react positively to a whiff of it. That ruled out that explanation for why my friend was missing. What if Marcel had gotten hurt? I couldn't remember how we made it down here at all.

"Why are we not going to space with humma?" Virnt wailed.

Birla patted him soothingly. “Shh, darling. Go back to bed.”

Dino is missing as well. What if the dog ate Marcel? Or…I guess more likely, the grays got them both.

“Where…is M-marc?” I pressed one paw against the wall, and tried to sit upright. “How did we get here?”

The Tilfish general blinked with concern. “You don’t remember? The human carried you into an access hatch, and checked that it was clear. He put you down, told me to patch you up…but I don’t have anything for first aid!”

“Okay. Where is he now?”

“Said something about hearing Arxur in the tunnels. Took that feral quadruped—”

“Dino, mama!” Virnt cheered. “Dino the dog!”

“Yes, that thing. Anyways, Marcel went looking for enemies. Mentioned clearing the tunnels, and keeping us safe.”

“And you let him go alone?”

“The human said to stay with you. He was blinking a lot…I’m not sure if your blood bothered him.”

“It would never. M-marc was upset that I’m hurt, if anything.”

“Are you sure, Slanek?”

“Of course I’m sure! He was fine around a Gojid stampede. They all…the humans all were. He saved…a trampled child.”

There was a long pause, as skepticism swam in the Tilfish general’s eyes. I knew the insectoid wouldn’t ditch Marcel, when the primate was our best asset against the Arxur. But I suppose few individuals beside myself would tempt a predator’s bloodlust. It took personal exposure to humanity’s nurturing side to accept that their empathy dominated.

Marcel said himself that he doesn’t like killing. Humans can balance empathy and violence; it’s what I told him at the supply tent.

A gunshot exchange sounded down the tunnel, and fear clenched at my heart. The adrenaline boosted me back to alertness, but I couldn’t stand up. Bootsteps smacked the floor, alongside the sound of munitions chipping bricks. A human yowl reverberated through the structure, followed by Dino’s throaty barks. Tears swelled in my

eyes, realizing Marcel would die alone.

I reached out to Birla, and pulled myself up with the last of my strength. Hunched over at the waist, I staggered in the direction of my friend's cry. The Tilfish general tried to grab my shoulder, flinching away as blood coated her leg. With a frustrated grunt, I hobbled down the tunnel. It wasn't long before I was leaning against the wall for support.

"FUCK OFF!" That was Marcel's thunderous voice. It was possible to discern the words in this roar, which was more formidable than any I'd heard before. "This is my turf! You're not coming in here, assholes!"

My legs buckled, and I crumpled back onto the floor. Why hadn't I reclaimed my firearm? The coldness was becoming palpable, making me wish for a human pelt to cocoon myself in. At least Marcel was still fighting, but I was in no state to rescue him. My pupils fluttered in his direction, as I sucked in some wheezing breaths.

The human was hugging a wall corner, and I could see his teeth flash from here. His hands popped off a few shots, while enemy rounds buffeted his refuge. Brick debris sprinkled overhead, as Marcel clutched his gun tighter. Dino was growling at his side, though the mutt appeared to be waiting for something.

"Surrender yourself, human! We have room for an honorable prisoner," a bone-chilling voice called out.

A maniacal laugh emanated from Marcel. "What is it with aliens, drawing my name in the 'kidnapping and torture' lottery? I'll pass."

I crawled along the floor, moving a few inches at a time. Since I was wounded anyways, my best usage was to serve as a distraction. The Arxur might wish to collect me as cattle, and that could give Marcel the clear shot he needed. The chances of us surviving Sillis were slim overall, but the Terran would fare better without my dead weight.

Scuttling noises echoed behind me, and Birla came racing down the hallway. The Tilfish general righted my seized firearm, angling it toward the Arxur. Despite her distrust, she was willing to come to the human's aid. In my opinion, she should've gone with him to begin with…better late than never, I suppose.

Three Arxur ducked around the corner, just as Birla halved the distance. The insectoid had a trusty shot, clocking one gray in the brain. Marcel released Dino upon the hostiles, and depressed his trigger. Enemy bullets answered, taking out a brick right above his head. I could feel his adrenaline vicariously; his binocular eyes were crazed.

I have to help somehow. The Slanek acting weak distraction seemed to work the last time…should I try it again?

"Yummy Venlil! Over here!" I cried out, with a faltering voice.

The Arxur had already scented my blood, I assumed. The trail must've drawn them down here, unless they followed us from the surface. It was possible they waited for us to lower our guard. While I'd technically been conscious in our travels, it was tough to retrieve the memories. There was a chance I wouldn't remember any of this now.

The two surviving grays weren't as distracted as the egg raiders had been, but I saw their pupils twitch. The lack of impulse control was in stark contrast to humans; I suppose I was lucky that Isif and his bunch didn't wolf me down in New York. A little blood or a wounded animal's cry worked their kind into a frenzy, even amidst combat.

Marcel cursed, realizing I'd abandoned my refuge. The human popped up from his crouch, and the grays rushed to shoot him. One bullet whizzed dangerously close to his earlobe, while additional shots lurked in the chamber. The lead Arxur's sights aligned with his temples; I felt my blood pressure plummet. Was that from my wounds, or just grief?

"NO!" I screamed.

There was nothing I could do to stop the bullet from piercing his brain. The Terran had become reckless out of concern for me, and he was paying the ultimate price. Marcel managed to take down one gray, in a final act of defiance. The next thing I heard was a deafening boom, as the monster shot my best friend.

The predator's head snapped back with unnatural speed, and he crashed onto his back. I screamed as the human lie splayed out on the floor. Dragging myself on all fours, my toes bled from the frantic pace. My frayed vocal cords screeched his name, while warm

tears ran down my face. The grief I felt was a chasm in my chest, an all-consuming sadness.

Birla dispatched the final Arxur, and scuttled over to Marcel's side. I managed to reach the predator's body, which was still warm to my touch. It was tough to see through blurry vision, but his hair didn't look like a deeper red than usual. The blood was imperceptible to my eyes…perhaps I didn't want to see it. My brain must be imagining the rise and fall of his chest; that, or he was slipping away right now.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "You w-were the best friend I ever had. I failed you. I always f-failed you, and I…MARCEL! D-don't leave me!"

Why did my human have to die? Why?!

My emotions devolved into an incoherent whirlwind, and I released a visceral wail. I slammed my good arm into his gut, furious at the universe. A high-pitched yelp came from beneath me, and Marcel's corpse shifted. My vision refocused on him, watching as he moved an arm to his head. The human's eyelids fluttered, and a grimace crossed his face.

My best friend pinched his nose. "Oh God…that rung my bell."

The grief that was fueling me dissipated. I clung to his warm chest with sobs of relief, and Dino came over to lick his face. Marcel pushed the dog away, an instinctive snarl on his lips. He unclipped his helmet, inspecting it with amazement. I gasped at the nick in the cloth lining; the bullet had grazed my human on the dome.

The red-haired soldier hoisted himself up, clutching me to his chest. I felt his wonderful fingers fiddling with my ears, and mewled my adoration. Alarm coursed through my veins, as Marcel stumbled. His skull absorbed much of the impact; the Terran might well be concussed. But he was blissfully alive, and that was music to my ears.

"I love you, Marc, the same as I did my flesh-and-blood brother. I care about you so much," I whispered in a faint voice. "I know I disappointed you. But you…you never disappointed me."

His hazel eyes moistened. "What did I tell you? I got the best Venlil. I'm only disappointed in how you view the world."

It took Marcel an agonizing minute to retrace his steps, and arrive

at our impromptu base. The predator sank against a wall, and leaned his head back. He allowed me to burrow into his stomach, snarling through his exhaustion. Virnt was giddy at the “humma’s return”, though his mother kept him at a distance.

Marcel peeked at my arm, and his mental fog vanished. He snapped at Birla, livid that she hadn’t tended to my wounds. The Tilfish general cowered at his ferocity, but I could tell he was just rattled. My human knew how close he came to dying; it didn’t help his mindset to reckon with my critical condition.

The human cleared his throat. “This might hurt, okay? Everything is going to be alright, Slanek. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Please forgive me. There’s nothing I w-wouldn’t do for you.” I wrapped my tail around Marcel’s wrist, and tensed up as he stitched my wound. “I…I don’t want to leave any…bad blood between us.”

“You hurt my feelings, that’s all. Virnt should be institutionalized for liking me? I’m that terrible to my best friend?”

“It’s…n-not like—OW! I l-like you. But t-things about you…should trigger fear at first.”

“Why? You know the Federation lied to you. They lied about us, omnivores like the Tilfish, and basic biology. I’m telling you it was all lies: predator disease and ‘feral’ predators are their ideas too. Stop regurgitating them.”

“T-there are people with predator disease. They…hurt people.”

“But predator disease isn’t just assigned to violent sociopaths. It’s used on anyone who’s wired differently. Do you realize by the Federation’s definition, *you* have predator disease?”

“No. That’s c-crazy, Marc.”

“I know. I fucking know! Mental health is a complicated thing, with thousands of conditions with unique attributes. Not all of them are violent. Not all of them need to be erased.”

Marcel finished patching me up, and retrieved a radio from his supplies. I mulled over his words, though my brainpower was running on empty. If predator disease was another vessel for Federation lies, that meant we were locking away harmless people. No wonder my human was upset with my suggestion for Virnt. It was the same as how Doctor Zarn wanted to “treat” me for

defending Marcel.

So there are different types of predator disease, with different causes and manifestations. And they…we use fear to ostracize every patient.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked.

Marcel squeezed my paw. “I’m sorry too. I should’ve talked to you about these things sooner. It’s my responsibility to educate you, but I’ve just tried to shield you.”

“I know I’m not easy to talk to. I…I know it hurts you when I freak out…or misinterpret you. You know, I wanted to kill Dino earlier…and I almost did.”

“None of that matters now. You’ve been my rock, Slanek. You brought me back from the edge, and you made me believe there was good in the galaxy.”

“T-that’s all I could ever want. Hey, if anything happens to me, tell my parents what w—”

“Tell them yourself. We’re getting out of here. I’m going to call for help, and try to make contact with the UN. Sounds good, huh?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him the United Nations was long gone. Just as they hadn’t come back for the soldiers on the cradle, nobody was swooping down to the sewers to rescue us. General Birla seemed unconvinced as well; the evacuation announcement stated the deadline in no uncertain terms. At least I could share my last hours with Marcel, rather than dying alone.

My human switched on his radio. “UN fleet, do you copy? This is Captain Marcel Fraser; we have a Venlil VIP in need of medevac. Transmitting our coordinates, over.”

There was no response once Marcel finished his message. The static didn’t seem to deter his efforts, since he repeated his transmission several times. I nuzzled against his wrist, and felt my eyelids becoming heavy. The predator’s warmth helped with my dropping temperature.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep calling them,” Marcel growled. “When they beat back the Arxur, they’ll come.”

I closed my eyes. “Yeah. Humans will win.”

“We sure will. Sleep well, Slanek.”

Dino sidled up to me as I dozed off, and my instincts rekindled. He placed his coarse snout on my leg, and my mind circled back to Federation lies. The dog hadn't shown any signs of being evil; he seemed loyal to the humans through thick and thin. Maybe Marcel was right about giving him a chance too.

Predators couldn't be inherently monstrous when the Terrans existed. This was a simple choice about whether the Federation defined the Venlil. I pressed one paw atop the dog's back, trusting my human to protect me. Marcel wouldn't put me in danger, and he said Dino was a friend.

The safest place in this Arxur raid was sandwiched between two watchful predators. Knowing this slumber might be my last, I drifted off at peace with my fate.

Chapter 96

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 5, 2136

To recount the harrowing hours after the initial clash would be a strenuous ordeal in itself. The Terrans' intention was to turn this into a lengthy battle, one which could go on for days. It was gut-wrenching to see Arxur vessels, huddled around Sillis' azure shape; I knew this was a facsimile of what the predators saw on Earth. There had never been a chance of holding or retaking the planet, not against a superior enemy.

The UN kept our forces active, while rotating personnel to keep fresh eyes on duty. Carlos and Onso were given leave for a short nap, though they were set to return within a few hours. Samantha was going through cups of brown liquid like it was a magic elixir, and Tyler had summoned a mug of his own. As a former officer, I understood his hesitancy to abandon his station.

I'm feeling a bit worn out myself. This is the longest battle I've ever witnessed…they're supposed to end in the span of a few hours.

"Any update, Sovlin?" Tyler stifled a yawn, and shook his head to avert sleepiness. "Break down the Arxur's current movement."

I blinked my heavy eyelids. "Sir, the grays haven't deviated from their orbital positions. They're on high alert, since our fleet is utilizing these 'hit-and-run' tactics as you call them."

"And the FTL disruptors are holding?"

"Yes, sir. UN ships are emitting that signal loud and clear, since we're outside the reach of Sillis' transmitters. Don't want the bastards warping in right atop us, like we did to them."

"Good. And Sovlin? You look like shit. Get some rest; I'll have a tech cover for you."

I disembarked from my seat, knowing that I wasn't much of a tactical specialist with my current brain fog. The humans weren't going to win this war by exhausting their crew; it wasn't clear how long we could stay in a state of combat readiness. Even a predator would tire of stress-driven situations over an extended duration. My

paws shuffled into the mess hall, and I collapsed on the cool floor.

Gojids certainly weren't built for constant adrenaline. It was a matter of time before the humans' efficacy diminished as well, and our resistance crumbled. Predators tired of a chase after awhile, which was why prey gained their flight impulse. When Carlos and Sam discussed their legends with Cilany, they left out their historical battles. I could fill in the blanks well enough from the Federation's knowledge.

Tyler had discussed Earth's world wars, though in limited detail. The first conflict was a particular display of primitive barbarism. Its trench warfare was either exaggerated, or had resulted in sloppy performances from their soldiers. The fact that it took so long to sue for peace was stubbornness; it was the refusal to surrender that Carlos mentioned. A human's body and mind would break before their will.

I snoozed on the mess hall floor. My dreams were broken, bits of harsh memories sewn together. Tyler's confirmation that humans fought wars for thousands of years looped through my head. My brain fused that encounter with Zarn's initial briefing. The Takkan doctor had been emphatic, stating that Terrans tormented each other through constant battle.

"*Humans are conquerors, who derive pleasure from dominating others. That is what their* '*explorers*' *have always done on their homeworld. They are aggressive, brutal, and territorial,*" *Zarn's voice declared.*

Tyler hurling me into the cabinets resurfaced. "*It's just how we are, man.*"

The imagery became increasingly surreal and chaotic, as my subconscious grasped at examples of their empathy. The humans had allowed a Gojid hospital ship to pass at the border skirmish; those pilots' radio chatter had conveyed a desire to talk, not fight. Throughout that clash, their forces ignored the vulnerable colony and hammered our military outposts instead. Those weren't the actions of out-of control brutes.

A calloused hand shook my shoulder, and I groaned as I stirred. The explorers on Venlil Prime hadn't done what Zarn implied. First contact should've seen Tarva's world conquered, when even Tyler acknowledged that invigorating drive. How could I understand mankind's dichotomous nature, when the past and the present were

contradictions? If I solved that riddle, it might give me an honest perspective on the Gojids' monstrous side too.

"Sovlin, you can't just sleep out here." Carlos was hovering over me, and taking care to avoid my bristling spines. "We let you get a few hours of shut-eye, but…someone's gonna step on you!"

I rubbed my eyes. "C-Carlos? Are humans, as a species, conquerors?"

"Er, I don't think so. We're warriors, and some people confuse the two. Mix in clannish tendencies and competition, then believe that your enemy is intrinsically different from you…yes, we felt that way toward our own. But look what the herbivores did to us because of that same belief."

"You're saying old humans didn't see their enemies as people."

"Yes. That's the belief that makes monsters of us all. Nobody has empathy for someone that is too unalike."

The pieces clicked in my brain, alongside a rush of horror. The Federation *was* guilty of the same savagery as the humans; they pillaged and condemned Earth, because predators weren't people. Brutal capabilities didn't just lurk inside primitive uplifts and flesh-eating species. Most concerningly, zero empathy wasn't a requisite to complete atrocities beyond comprehension.

But it's not just a trait of the Gojids. Thank the Protector.

"You're very wise, Carlos," I murmured. "I wonder where you learned it from."

The olive-skinned soldier sighed. "Let's just say I didn't grow up in a stable home. There's a reason I didn't check in on my family post-Earth. I decided that I never wanted to be like my old man, and that I was going to figure things out for myself."

"And you joined the Peacekeepers to get away?"

"Yes. I got assigned to humanitarian missions at first, and it felt good to make a difference. I learned a lot about people…er, humans. I learned how to stand in the other guy's shoes."

"Thank you for trying to understand me, from the beginning. I never deserved it."

"I'm not so sure you're a bad person. You had that belief I talked about, and it made you a monster. That's as human as it gets,

Sovlin."

"I'm not sure that is a compliment."

"Oh, it's not. Anyhow, Tyler…ahem, *Officer Cardona* wants us back on the bridge. Let's get to work, huh?"

Carlos ushered me back into the bridge, a rejuvenated light in his eyes. The situation on Sillis appeared unchanged, from a cursory glance at the viewport. Smaller Terran craft harassed the Arxur fringes, while the main UN fleet prevented escape or reinforcements. The grays weren't challenging our position. It seemed that the demons wanted us to make the first move, while the humans were in no rush to act.

Captain Monahan had joined the brown liquid party, with a steaming cup in her hand. The commander was still supervising the bridge, and her puffy eyes suggested she hadn't taken any reprieve. Our warship was playing a supporting role, poking at any Arxur that neared Terran ranks. Combat readiness was maintained on the bridge; if there was an opportune moment, we'd capitalize on it.

I strode up to a weary Tyler. "Sir! You wanted us back? Shit, I'm ready to tear the grays a new one!"

A rested Onso sauntered up to our group. "We're in agreement there. When are we charging in?"

"We're making plans," the blond-haired human growled. "Listen to what we intercepted while you were out. The Arxur got a nice call through their, shall I say, poorly-hidden FTL comms."

I peered at the sensors officer's screen, and saw video clips from across the region. It was news to me that the Arxur possessed FTL communications; building such a network seemed beyond their intelligence. How had the Federation never detected this infrastructure, if it existed? Nonetheless, it was tough to argue with footage that couldn't have reached us yet.

The first clip Tyler selected was from a probe encircling a military station. Massive hangars were visible from above, alongside a few patrollers circling lazily. Alarms sounded on the base, moments before sleek bombers blinked into existence. I could see the UN insignia emblazoned on their hulls, alongside other retrofits. The upgrades were apparent from what humanity's allies first loaned them.

So this is why we weren't given more numbers for the shadow fleet. The resources were diverted elsewhere, and not just to the war with the Federation.

The Terran bombers swooped down on the Dominion installation, just as they had assaulted Gojid bases. Enemy resistance was wiped out upon contact, unable to hold a candle to this raid. Munitions rained down on the martial station, and obliterated its defensive outfits first. Explosions punished the living quarters next; any filthy grays still onboard were buried.

The humans ensured that nothing remained of the base, and that no Arxur escaped off-world. It floored me that the grays had allocated so few ships to defense. Then again, the aggressive monsters couldn't think of anything but killing. Their singular focus was inflicting torment upon the Tilfish homeworld. It had been a long time since the Arxur met a worthy foe.

Samantha swallowed a gulp of her bean drink. "It's the same scene on every base we're aware of. Even if these fuckwits take Sillis, they'll have no place for the ships to return. Oh, and we snipped the cord on those comms too."

I flicked my claws. "Nice work! You took the bastards for everything they're worth."

"We took something else of theirs too," Tyler chuckled. "You'll like this, Gojid."

The tall human picked out a new video from the data feed. A Terran transport was docking with a streamlined station, which seemed tailored to ship traffic rather than war. More UN craft latched onto other compartments, rather than causing a traffic jam in the main hangar. The primates were well-practiced at forced entries; they'd make an opening or pick a lock where necessary.

Tyler jumped to an internal security feed, which showed armored humans busting through an emergency airlock. Fattened Arxur guards greeted them with gunfire, but the Terrans overran their garrison. The boarding party mowed down their opposition, and barked to each other about rescuing captives. Several primates returned past the camera, carrying prey aliens that were in poor condition.

"We've had the plans to liberate the cattle farms since day one.

Now that we know how the grays operate…we fucking hit every farm too," Samantha hissed.

Carlos bared his teeth. "Our estimates are millions of cattle per sector. How are we going to get them all off-world?"

"They're in our custody, and that's what matters." Tyler suppressed a yawn, and blinked with drowsiness. "We'll move as many as we can."

"That's one hell of a…humanitarian victory, Carlos. Forget the logistics," I said.

Onso curled his lip. "Why aren't the grays going back for their assets?"

"Because that ship has sailed, buddy," Tyler answered. "They threw the whole sector for one rock! Might as well take Sillis; they have nothing to lose."

Satisfaction swelled in my chest, and the Yotul brightened with content as well. The Arxur just lost all major assets and infrastructure across a 100-light year radius; this could be a pivotal turning point in the war. While the humans had sacrificed Sillis, they had undermined the grays' malice everywhere else. This was cause for celebration, no matter what unfolded in this system.

"I'd love to see the predators losing their dimwitted minds," I chuckled.

Samantha folded her arms. "Would you? Show him what they directed at us."

Tyler brought up a single outbound transmission, and the visage of a female gray materialized. It was the same one taunting the humans at the start of the battle. Now, its maw was agape with fury; its eyes were furious slits. It jabbed its claws at the camera, like it wished to stab the listener through the screen.

"You irreverent grass-munchers really fucked up now! How dare you destroy Dominion assets?! I'm going to burn this fucking planet to the ground," the raving Arxur roared. "Since you killed my food, I'm going to make a cattle farm solely of humans to replace it! That will put you back in your fucking place! You will regret this."

I blinked in confusion. The grays perceived the humans as equals, and that should be doubly true after our battlefield prowess here.

From what I'd overheard, it would go against the Arxur's twisted philosophy to eat another predator. Was this Chief Hunter really going to go against its government's stance, out of spite?

I don't think the humans would make good cattle. They're too headstrong and devious.

Tyler cleared his throat. "That leads us to our plan. Evacuations on Sillis were subpar, given their rushed timetable. We will, in no circumstances, stand for humans being captured for that purpose."

"So what are we doing? Shooting down cattle ships?" I offered.

"If it comes to that and we can't board them, yes. But getting soldiers off Sillis just became a priority. The UN fleet is going to engage the Arxur head-on, distract 'em. Meanwhile, shuttles will sneak through the gaps and rescue as many humans as possible."

"Great, sir. Just tell me how we're going to get their attention."

"That's the thing. I…I will be heading down to the surface. I know it's atypical for an officer to volunteer himself, but a personal matter has come up that I must attend to."

Onso hissed in annoyance. "You didn't invite me? Where was the signup sheet?"

"You can come if you want to. But buddy, it's very dangerous."

"Dangerous *for them*. I'm coming with you, end of discussion."

That was an interesting way of speaking to a superior officer, but the Yotul seemed to get special considerations. I couldn't understand why Tyler would rush off and shirk his station duties. It was an unusual decision to say the least. What could be personal enough to have swayed his judgment? While I didn't want to challenge the big guy, I felt a responsibility to talk some sense into him.

"Forgive my insolence, but I care about your welfare. You're an officer, sir, like you said!" I chewed at my claws, anxious at the risk Tyler was undertaking. "With respect, you're more useful up here. The captain wouldn't want you wasting your talents on fieldwork."

"Captain Monahan has been apprised of the circumstances, and she signed off on my departure," the sensors officer rumbled. "With this development, I would be too distracted to fulfill my duties. You guys will be fine without me."

“What development? Personal or not, I can’t understand without a clue why you’re doing this.”

Samantha grimaced. “We should just tell Sovlin, sir. He’ll find out on his own.”

Tyler narrowed his eyes. “Suit yourself. The floor is all yours, Sammy.”

“It’s Sam. Anyway, snap to it, Sovlin. I was scanning transmissions from the surface, like Ty ordered, and I keyed into this one.”

Samantha’s pale fingers scrolled through her viewing history, and she picked out a highlighted transmission. I eyed the humans warily, wondering why they had reservations about sharing this information. What could happen on Sillis that had any personal impact on myself? The Tilfish genocide was tragic, but I had no connections on the surface.

A broken audio clip filtered through the speakers. “*This is Captain Marcel Fraser…”*

Hot blood rushed to my ears, and a ringing sound drowned out the rest of the transmission. I keeled over against the station, shaking my head in denial. That predator’s voice was one I could recognize anywhere. Knowing that Marcel, the human I’d tormented, was trapped on Sillis changed everything. Of course Tyler wanted to rush off and rescue his packmate.

What would Marcel think of my presence on this ship? What if Slanek is with him…I threw that poor Venlil around like a rag doll.

Guilt ebbed through my veins with renewed strength. How was it fair that I was cozy on this ship, while Marcel and Slanek could be captured to a cattle farm? If there was a way for me to trade places, I would do it in a heartbeat. It wouldn’t scratch the debt I owed my two victims. I deserved suffering from the beginning anyways; the Terrans were too merciful.

Tyler twisted his fingers into my scruff. “Sovlin? Shit, this is why I didn’t want to tell him.”

“I..I can’t…” Tears soaked my cheek fur, and mucus congested my nasal passageways. “G-good luck, sir. I understand.”

“Hey, I’m gonna get Marcel and Slanek out of there. Just need to pull someone off nav station to fly my shuttle. I know those folks

are a lot harder to replace than us people reading screens. Not sure we can spare a pilot, but I have to get to Sillis."

"I'll g-go. I can fly."

"No way! How the fuck would I explain that to Marcel and Slanek?"

"I've flown d-down during an orbital raid before. Back when I picked up Cilany. Carlos and Sam can attest to my skills. It's t-the best option for the ship…sir."

"I…I don't think they'll react well to your presence. You know what I mean."

"Slanek and Marcel are both pilots. If either wishes to serve me to the grays, I will crawl into their cages willingly. I just need to get you down there. Let me do this for them…for Marcel."

Tyler crossed his arms, deliberating his options. I understood that my victims wouldn't be pleased to see me, but taking a pilot from navigations could get humans here killed. It had to be an expendable crew member like myself. Besides, from my perspective, failure was not an option. Marcel and Slanek would be saved, if I had to sacrifice myself in the process.

"Fine," the sensors officer decided. "Let's get a shuttle and get moving."

Chapter 97

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 5, 2136

Sitting behind the helm of a ship felt cathartic, after my long absence from the captain's chair. Tyler volunteered as my copilot, while Onso lounged in the backseat. The Yotul seemed too casual for our current suicide mission. Even with the UN's distraction, there was a chance the Arxur would come after us on our descent.

Dominion forces were concentrated around Sillis' supercontinent, since circumplanetary targeting was not an option. While the unique geography narrowed the staging points available, it also condensed settlements into a single region. That meant less bombs were needed to cover the planet. Our plan was to slip the shuttle in on the ocean side, as the Terrans hounded the grays head-on. I wondered how our original defensive line, which had vanished into the atmosphere, would factor in.

Perhaps they can cover our ass during atmospheric re-entry. That's if they're not involved with the rescues themselves.

Those vessels would be the easiest ones to sneak down to the surface, given that they didn't have an Arxur buffer in the way. Getting back up to orbit would be a challenge though, and the grays watched for evacuation ships. Small patrollers weren't built to tote more than a handful of passengers regardless. Outside help was required to rescue entire platoons.

Tyler blinked his icy eyes. "Take us in, Sovlin. Godspeed."

"You think predators would build guns into evacuation shuttles," I grumbled. "Might be helpful for your trigger-happy pal to shoot anything that moves."

"In most events that we're using these, it's a dire emergency and we're abandoning ship. These aren't average transports."

Onso narrowed his eyes. "But why can't we abandon ship *with guns*?"

"I don't build these things! Are we going to sit here and argue about this all day?"

This was no time for playful banter; action was picking up on the viewport. The Terran fleet moseyed in with purposeful movements, and ensured that the Arxur spotted their advance. Dominion vessels rushed out to meet the numerically inferior armada, leaving the ocean side open. I increased our acceleration, and broke out of our low-emissions glide. Until now, our shuttle had been taking a quiet course to flank the enemy.

It was impossible to tell which ship was commandeered by Captain Monahan. Carlos and Samantha were in over their heads alone on sensors, but I trusted our replacements to pick up the slack. The worst Terran crew member was probably more fit for service than the average herbivore. Humans were nothing if not competent in combat. We just needed this distraction to work as planned, to reaffirm that very idea to the grays.

The Terran armada dispensed a few explosives to attract attention. The grays took the bait, once their unsophisticated brains zeroed in on the UN's aggression. Backing down from a duel signaled weakness; the humans and the Arxur were both obsessed with not appearing infirm. Pride was a shared trait between the two predator species, and seemingly, our primitive Yotul. I was unconvinced Onso wouldn't run off and get us killed the second we landed.

My eyes darted to our data feed. "It seems our side is getting their snouts bashed in. I hope this is worth it."

In close-range combat, the UN was unequipped for a confrontation without resorting to tricks. The humans' front line was getting picked off several at a time, evidenced by the explosions in the viewport. I wasn't sure how much time they could buy us, so I kicked our speed up another notch. No Arxur had come to intercept our shuttle, and we had breached Sillis' high orbit already. My heart was hammering in my throat all the same.

Perhaps my fear was for the crew we'd abandoned. Our minimal numbers couldn't resist an Arxur charge; there were less than a thousand vessels in the shadow fleet. The Dominion had six times that ship count at hand, and were using most assets at their disposal. Following their humiliation across the sector, this was personal. Rare instances of teamwork sprouted, with the grays ganging up on wounded Terran craft.

We need more numbers. Surely the UN defensive line is coming any

second, right?

Blips blinked onto my radar, as friendly contacts emerged from Sillis' orb on cue. The Arxur had learned that humans practiced ambush tactics, and their rear flank was ready for the sneak attack. The enemy vessels swiveled around on a dime, unleashing munitions with prejudice. The resurfacing Terrans lobbed explosives back, desperate to stem the tide. The grays' onslaught was unrelenting, with minimal attention given to any inbound missiles.

"Pick up the pace!" Tyler barked. "I imagine we're pulling all ships back at any moment."

I sighed in exasperation. "I'm going as fast as I can. Do you want the ship to break apart on descent?"

Onso bared his teeth. "Is it better to get gunned down up here? As the humans say, no guts, no glory!"

"There is no glory in being scattered across Sillis' orbit! What is wrong with you?"

"Yeah, I think we need to wean you off Earth sayings, buddy. You interpret them all with the utmost aggression," the blond predator muttered.

"I'll try again. Ahh, a predator! Its eyes are forward facing…and it f-flashed its teeth!" The Yotul utilized a high-pitched voice, and faked an occasional stutter. "It's an evil abomination and needs to d-die! That better, Tyler?"

"You're too much."

The primitive was distracting me from my approach, so I shut his antics out from my mind. The shuttle obeyed my commands, its slender frame humming softly. I offered a final bit of juice to the engines, and they answered with a hearty push. This would be a tricky entry, but there was no option to follow safety guidelines. If the Arxur circled over to us, we would be easy pickings.

Marcel and Slanek's survival relied on us getting through to the planet. I'd rather take a riskier path, and know I'd done everything in my power to save them. Everyone onboard this shuttle was willing to gamble with our fates, for our comrades' good. The thought of the duo in an Arxur farm made my blood simmer; it was an unacceptable outcome. Both of them had suffered enough at my

paws.

The shuttle blazed toward Sillis' azure surface, and I leaned forward with concentration. The shadow fleet was pulling back, while the UN defensive outfit covered for them behind enemy lines. Those re-emerged friendlies followed suit shortly after, dipping back into the Tilfish world's atmosphere. A few grays gave chase, not wanting to let the Terrans slip under the radar again.

"Two Arxur cruisers changing course, and targeting us for interception," Tyler growled.

I gritted my teeth. "They won't catch us. They won't try to follow this descent."

My claws smacked the throttle lever, and pushed us well past recommended output. We hurtled toward Sillis at a breakneck pace, while the Arxur clocked in at sensible speeds. Their vector lessened the distance between us, but it wasn't closing the gap fast enough. The planet ahead was enlarging much quicker, and our trajectory scraped the edge of the atmosphere.

Humans built for durability, so I had to trust that emergency shuttles could take a beating. Actively accelerating into a descent was madness, and even Tyler looked nauseous. The shuttle frame quivered from the stress, sending jolts through my body. Controls offered erratic responses, and I warred with the steering column. Alarms blared from the main systems, warning us of excessive heat.

The temperature climbed on the interior accordingly, as hull shielding failed to contain the environmental effects. Incineration was an agonizing way to die; an undercurrent of fear ebbed through my veins. I cobbled myself together enough to check our sensors. The Arxur contacts were pulling back, and our track on them was spotty. That meant they were losing us as well.

I hurled all power into reverse thrusters, and corrected our descent angle. The harness dug into my shoulders, as it restrained me during the sudden shift. Tyler's face had gone ashen, and he squeezed his eyes shut. The massive predator was not enjoying the turbulent ride. The shuttle's velocity slowed, though not before our hull had taken a beating.

"I've got it under control," I gasped out. "Going to bring us in low and fly to the stated coordinates."

Tyler groaned. “You unstable, neurotic Gojid! You were about two seconds from getting us cooked.”

“No guts, no glory. Sovlin’s an honorary Yotul after that stunt!” Onso yipped.

Don’t insult me like that, I thought to myself. *I grew up with electricity.*

I leveled out the shuttle’s flight course, once we neared the choppy water. The waves were a blur at our speed, zooming by as I gunned it toward our location. It was dizzying to look at our surroundings, but the human was gawking all the same. It was rare to fly with such quickness in-atmosphere, due to civilian traffic and hazards.

“You don’t realize how fast supersonic flight is in space.” Tyler pressed his hand to his chin, and turned his eyes toward me. “Here, you can tell what our velocity is. You see the world zooming by.”

I drummed my claws on the console. “There’s no time to waste. I’m just keeping enough altitude to clear any buildings. Marcel’s coordinates are inland a bit.”

“You did great, Sovlin. But hey…I’m still not sure it’s a good idea for you to make an appearance.”

“Marcel visited me in jail. I hope my presence will not be an undue burden on him. I will comply with whatever his wishes are.”

Our shuttle cleared wide patches of ocean, and another yawn crossed Tyler’s face. The sensors officer hadn’t slept since the battle commenced; I suspected the big predator craved a distraction. He could chat anyone’s ear off, if he got started on a topic he liked. Perhaps he’d be interested in jawing about his family? The shoreline would be visible within a minute, so he just needed to stay awake a little longer.

I cleared my throat. “What’s something you did as a child that you cherish, Tyler?”

“Right on. Me and my pops used to go out to the lake, rent a boat,” the human reminisced. “We’d sit out there for hours and shoot the wind. You know, enjoy nature. Our relationship’s become… estranged, but I miss fishing with him. We caught some real beauts.”

“Your FAVORITE childhood pastime is water hunting?! Your father took *his kid* to do this?”

“Hey, chill out! It’s not like we ate any. We just caught ’em on a hook, took a picture, and threw ’em back.”

“That…then what was the point of catching them?! Just when I stop thinking of you as predators, you say shit like that! You torment fish for father-son bonding time.”

Onso suppressed a growl. “I rarely cry ‘predator’, but that is twisted and unnatural. It would be fine if you were seeking food, but you are just doing it for kicks.”

“It’s just a way to relax, man. And maybe some humans do like hunting; so what? It’s not like we’re killing them.”

Disgust swelled in my chest, hearing the predator discuss hunting as “relaxing” entertainment. I could picture the blond beast on a boat, giggling as he toyed with a suffocating fish. To think that a father passed those behaviors to his son! How could an empathetic species consider that a socially acceptable pastime? How did Tyler not see how fucked up that hobby was?

I brooded for the rest of the journey, scowling out the windshield. Buildings blurred beneath us, alongside charred ruins and mushroom clouds. There was no telling if Marcel’s corner of Sillis was intact. That human, who I knew was vegetarian, would surely recognize the ethical flaws in his packmate’s sadism. I hadn’t thought Officer Cardona was a vicious animal before now.

Tyler tapped my shoulder as we landed. “Shit, I’m sorry. I know that’s a sensitive subject for you guys. I was just thinking about the one time my dad was proud of me, and it was that.”

“W-well, that’s fucked. Your father instilled heinousness in you. P-parents have a responsibility to teach their kids good values,” I managed.

“Right. We cool?”

“Yeah. Let’s go kill some Arxur.”

I couldn’t look at the primate the same, thinking of him learning predation. Humans claimed that they didn’t hunt in the modern day; Noah said their meat was grown in labs. Clearly, that wasn’t the whole truth, if Tyler had no qualms about his family outings. How could any feeling person go along with that?

Tyler admits Terrans are violent and bloodthirsty. Sometimes, those base

instincts must be given higher consideration than their empathy.

Humans policed themselves with moral laws; progress was still needed on the specifics. When hunting was ingrained in their ancestry, it made sense that remnants persisted into the civilized era. The predators just needed an introduction to proper values. I was certain well-meaning brutes like Tyler could learn that animals weren't playthings.

I parked the shuttle on a sidewalk, in close proximity to Marcel's coordinates. With the Arxur traipsing about, this was no time to relapse into human phobia. Onso snapped his gun up and clambered out into the open. I checked my surroundings, before raising my own weapon. There was nothing around us besides the faint glow of dawn's sunlight.

"Marcel, do you read me?" Tyler croaked into his radio. "It's me, Tyler. Your better half. We've landed, but I don't have a visual on you."

The pavement was rough beneath my hindlegs, and the air felt acrid in my throat. I steered a wide path around Tilfish bodies in the street, as did the human. Terrans were averse to death on the Gojid cattle ship, but this was a different response. Tyler had a case of the shakes, rather than wanting to puke. His binocular eyes twitched in an odd way; I wondered darkly when his last meal occurred.

Muzzle flashes appeared in our periphery, and I dropped to the ground on instinct. The human herded Onso into a storefront; I scurried over to them on shaking legs. Bullets peppered our refuge, as Arxur enemies rallied to our location. The raiders had established a heavy presence in the city. What if they were looking for Terrans to round up?

The blond human tossed an explosive into the street, and high-pitched growls echoed through the air. Peeking through the broken glass, I saw mutilated grays soaked in blood. Whatever Tyler deployed sent shrapnel in a wide radius, and caught the aggressive beasts off-guard. The surviving enemies circled back to regroup, giving us a breather.

"Marcel, tell us you're still alive, bro. We're right on top of you, and there's no signs of friendly activity. Have you relocated?" Tyler panted.

The Yotul blinked his dilated eyes. “Let’s get back to the ship. I think they’re…”

“Shit Tyler, it’s good to hear your voice.” Gunfire sounded in the background, and audible scratches surfaced from Marcel fumbling his radio. “We’re in the sewers. Need backup ASAP!”

That information gave me the adrenaline boost I needed. I unloaded a magazine at the approaching Arxur posse, in the hopes of pushing them back. Marcel’s packmate jerked his pupils downward, and rushed over to a manhole cover. The predator searched for a lever, finding one with his hands. Tyler tugged at the mechanism, and robotic systems popped the hatch.

Onso growled, as he took down a gray with a well-placed shot. The Yotul protested when Tyler pulled at his shoulders; the primitive was the first to descend into the manhole. The human insisted on being the last one to enter, and hurried me to the ladder next. I hopped down the rungs, jumping into the mucky tunnel.

Tyler dropped onto the ground, landing awkwardly on his ankle. He’d sealed the cover behind him, and I hoped that would delay our attackers. Thankfully, our shuttle could be locked to human biometrics; that should prevent the Arxur from running off with our ride. We didn’t need the same problem I had on the Harchen’s *Blissful Modernity*.

“My leg is fucked. Double-time it, people,” the tall Terran barked. “Onso, if you ever wanted to charge in…now’s a good time.”

Now that we were in the tunnels, I could detect the same gunfire I’d heard on the radio. My ears assured me the fight was still ongoing, but Slanek had already been wounded before this clash. With Marcel stuck guarding his Venlil buddy, there was no telling if he could best the Arxur. His band was lucky to survive on Sillis this long.

I channeled my inner Onso, dashing off like a madman. This was my opportunity to save the human I’d brutalized, and give some meaning to his decision to spare my life.

Chapter 98

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: December 5, 2136

Marcel made the decision to move deeper into the tunnels. The further we got from my blood trail, the less chance we had of attracting Arxur attention. The human did everything in his power to disinfect my wounds and mask their scent. It was stressful to realize the atrocities occurring aboveground, as we camped amidst relative serenity.

All it would take was one Arxur patrol to flush us out, scouring the sewers for hiding souls. Regardless, once the city was scraped dry, antimatter bombs would descend on it. Time was running out with finite certainty; we would be dead one way or another. General Birla seemed to be losing the motivation to carry on. If it wasn't for her cheery son, I think the Tilfish officer might've given up.

Marcel fished into his pack, offering Birla a handful of berries. "You haven't eaten in days. Let me guess: you don't want predator food?"

"I…I want Virnt to eat," the Tilfish general offered half-heartedly. "Please give my portion to him."

"Not happening. Virnt needs you at your best, huh?"

"Dammit, human. We don't have enough!"

I forced a confident ear flick. "Marcel packed plenty of food for his fat ass. I'm sure we have enough to go around."

"My 'fat ass?'" the human growled. "I'm not the one who ate an entire can of Pringles during our board game session."

"I like salt! That was one time!"

"The fact that it happened once is enough."

I huffed in irritation. How could Marcel bring that up at a time like this? The Terran soldier extended his hand to Birla again, and she gazed into his hazel eyes. The insectoid relented to her hunger, snatching them away with a greedy leg. She wolfed them down in a single gulp, cramming them into her mandibles.

Virnt crawled up Marcel's arm. "Humma, what's a Pringle?"

"It's a salty crisp made from potatoes. You'd like it, kiddo!" the

vegetarian replied.

“Can I have one?”

“I don’t have any now. But…I got gummy worms.”

Birla and I both gaped at the predator, who blinked in confusion. Why would Marcel be feeding invertebrate animals to Virnt? I was confused why an herbivore human was carrying meat at all; perhaps my friend hit his head harder than I thought. Beyond the obvious moral issues, the cure would cause an allergic reaction within the Tilfish child. He couldn’t eat flesh, even if his mother was okay with it.

The insectoid general looked on the verge of tears. “Please…don’t feed him predator food, soldier Marcel. I’m begging you.”

“What? I got a vegan brand.” The Terran pulled a segmented cylinder, which was the color of Zurulian blood. He started to pass it to Virnt, before realization flashed in his pupils. “*Shit*…did you guys think it was an actual worm?! It’s just fruit juice and sugar—”

“That’s shaped to look like an animal?” I grumbled.

“Well. Yeah.”

Marcel hesitated, before offering the gummy worm to the Tilfish child. Virnt accepted the spongy candy, and giggled atop the human’s forearm. I knew my best friend tried to be mindful of predatory qualities, but even he had a difficult time realizing which facets might offend us. I accepted humans for the flesh-eaters they were; it was just jarring when my buddy reflected that cultural schism.

It’s clear my human was obsessed with bringing candy for the kids. I’m sure he was stressed enough making sure it was all edible.

My buddy rose to his feet, and beckoned for us to continue our trek. I hopped onto his back, unable to walk of my own volition. Dino was dutiful, sniffing the ground ahead of us. Birla guarded the rear flank, ensuring that nothing snuck up from behind. The Tilfish general and the human had grown more comfortable around each other. Unfortunately, in the insectoid’s case, weariness might’ve played a role.

I kept my eyes peeled, and tried to stay alert. The tunnels split off in various directions; Marcel was charting an arbitrary course. The

predator plodded along with determination, as much to avoid Birla's defeatism as anything. It floored me how he continued to radio the UN, despite an absence of responses. No answer was an answer of itself.

We reached another fork in the sewers, prompting a decision. My ears picked up on growling from our left; judging by Marcel stowing Virnt in his duffel, he heard it too. The human peeked around the wall, rather than running away as wisdom encouraged. I suppose he wanted to see if the Arxur had spotted us, and determine the possibility of us being tracked.

"God, Slanek. Those poor people," my friend murmured.

I followed his piercing stare, and spotted a gray silhouette in the distance. It was crouched over a Tilfish corpse, chowing away. Other Arxur rushed around with cages, trapping insectoids inside. The faint cries were almost inaudible over bullet pops, but they were the unmistakable registers of children. Pity etched itself onto Marcel's scarred face.

"I can't go on. B-billions of my people dead…" Birla collapsed against a wall, buzzing hysterically. She stuffed a leg into her mouth to muffle the noise. "My home. Everyone has abandoned us, and my son and I are trapped here. Children, that humans have left to die, taken as cattle."

Marcel hesitated, before removing me from his back. He crouched next to the Tilfish general, and wrapped an arm around her thorax. The human was gentle, pulling her head against his chest. Birla's eyes widened in alarm, but she allowed herself to absorb his warmth. I could see the proximity to the Terran set her instincts ablaze.

The red-haired primate stood abruptly. "Fuck it. Let's go save the kids."

"W-what? But you—" Birla began.

"We're going. Slanek, stay here. I'll give you my sidearm."

I thought about arguing with him, but his resolute scowl told me his decision was final. Clasping the gun between my paws, I huddled against the wall. The shallow sounds of my breathing mixed with the background noise. After waiting for Marcel to charge off to rescue the kids, I inched closer to his new position. My injuries

wouldn't prevent me from picking off a gray or two.

Dino bounded into the fray, eager to get his jaws on an Arxur. Birla had life in her steps too, as she followed my human's path. If we were doomed to die on Sillis, what better way was there to go down? We could save kids from becoming a monster's plaything; we could help their parents defend them. The grays were shooting at *something*, so some insectoids must be fighting back.

I scooted along the floor, and drew close enough to see who was putting up a defense. Tilfish exterminators were mounting a desperate stand, spraying flames at the Arxur. Only two of them were still living, and they had been separated from the children. As much as I hated these bastards at the extermination office, this was a good thing they were engaged in here.

"What the—" One exterminator gasped, as an Arxur was shot from behind. His compound eyes focused on Marcel, who was firing on the grays. "Humans? No…they left us."

The Tilfish predator-killers looked terrified, but their flamethrowers steered clear of Marcel and Birla. Virnt's mother channeled her own fury, gunning down grays at point-blank range. The Arxur backed away, shielding their caged prizes. The exterminator who had spoken before shouted to my human, and begged for the kids to be saved. I was surprised he would voice such a request.

I guess the Terrans look downright nice next to the grays. Though, I wouldn't trust those Tilfish not to torch Marcel the second this is over.

The human lunged forward, and ducked behind a fallen Arxur corpse. My friend utilized the gray's body to absorb incoming bullets. The peril he was undertaking perturbed me, but I was confident that this wasn't a suicide run. However, that changed as Marcel's eyes suddenly darted to his pocket. Amidst gunfire, was the vegetarian paging the radio again?! The UN weren't coming to our rescue; Tilfish children meant nothing to them.

"Have to help," I wheezed to myself. "Move!"

It took painstaking minutes to advance, until I was almost to the conflict zone. My injuries were cause for absolute self-loathing; why did I have to be a wounded liability? Hugging the sidearm, it took conscious effort to map out the battlefield. There were eleven Arxur total, following my friends' kills so far. That was a lot for one

human and three panicked Tilfish to manage.

Matters took a turn for the worse, as two grays circled off down the tunnel. They were heading right for my position, and had evaded Marcel's notice. I could tell from their flaring nostrils that they'd scented me. If I distracted them for a while, that improved my human's odds. My forearms raised the gun, popping off three shots.

Each bullet missed by a long shot, earning sneers from the grays. One soldier licked its lips, and smacked the gun out of my paws. Absolute terror coursed through my veins, as its teeth hovered a hair from my throat. I was all too aware of my vulnerability, and my instincts were a suffocating fog. My desire was to scream, but I couldn't open my mouth.

"You scared, stupid animal." The lead Arxur traced a claw across my throat, and pressed its other arm into my sternum. "A delicacy like you—"

A blur of motion appeared in my periphery. A brown ball plowed into the filthy carnivore at full speed, stabbing claws straight into its throat. The Arxur staggered away from me, while its knees buckled under it. It gave disbelieving gargles, sensing its life ebb away in a second. The creature clinging to its neck was a Gojid, and my savior looked deranged.

The Gojid dismounted, locking his claws in front of him. He met the Arxur's challenging stare, and positioned himself between me and the monster. Those rich brown quills sported a pattern I'd know anywhere; it was one I'd last seen trying to execute my friend. Absolute hatred spurred me to my feet, and I screamed in a blind rage.

I hurled myself at Sovlin's back, with anger granting me the strength to lunge ahead. The Gojid's spines warded me off, but I barely felt the pricks. This monster treated my friend like an animal, placing a shock collar around his neck. The cruel captain inflicted agony for kicks, and disfigured him for life. The residual trauma still affected Marcel to this day, no matter how he tried to mask it.

"The Arxur, you dumbfuck!" Sovlin hissed. "You can do what you want with me after I deal with it."

A gunshot rippled down the tunnel, a thunderclap that snapped my

outrage. A bullet sailed through the back of the gray's skull, and ended its life in an instant. The kill was courtesy of a Yotul, who looked pleased with himself. I didn't understand how either alien ended up here, but I was hoping the Gojid would end up in an Arxur cage.

The Yotul chuckled to himself. "Too slow, old man! *I* dealt with it."

Pained grunts echoed down the hallway, distracting me. Sovlin sprinted off before I could finish him, and the repugnant Arxur had taken my gun. Logical thoughts be damned, I'd execute that sadistic fucker even if he meant to help now. The level of hatred I felt for him was unrivaled; it was unfair that Earth let him off the hook for his unthinkable crimes.

A limping human ambled down the hallway, and a series of curses ensued. Confusion took over, as I recognized Tyler's towering stature. The blond Terran was taking ginger steps, while his teeth were gritted in pain. I had spoken to Marcel's friend over messaging services, after the Battle of Earth. Both of us shipped out of the system days later, and I hadn't heard from him since then.

Why the hell is he here? Tyler was assigned to a ship…did he crash? I wondered. *More importantly, why the fuck is he with Sovlin?!*

"Hey Slanek," the massive human grunted. "You rang?"

I glowered at the lumbering predator. "What the fuck? WHAT THE FUCK?!"

"I can explain. First off, I want you to know that I did kick his ass. Secondly, Captain Monahan personally requested me for my alien expertise, then placed Sovlin under my command. So really, it's her fault."

"I thought you were Marcel's friend! Why would bring that fucking monster anywhere near him?"

"Because he was the best man for the job," the Yotul chimed in. "Sovlin's an arrogant prick, but we wouldn't have gotten to you without him."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Onso. Thanks for asking."

Tyler steadied his gun, and limped a few steps closer. I picked Marcel's sidearm up from the sewer water, not wanting to be

unarmed. My human had gunned down several grays, while utilizing his unconventional cover. The corpse shield helped him to press ahead; he was unwilling to let the Arxur captors get away.

Birla had formed ranks with the Tilfish exterminators. The three insectoids were combining flames and bullets, picking off one gray at a time. Two enemy survivors with the cages were retreating, and that forced my human to shed his corpse shield. Marcel needed to advance more quickly; that meant throwing caution aside.

Sovlin rushed up behind him, and strained to catch the longer-limbed predator. The Gojid's cheeks were puffed out with exertion, but he wasn't slowing down. Was that monster trying to kill Marcel, this long after our escape from his ship? I didn't understand why Tyler violated our trust by bringing that spiky freak. A true friend would've done us a solid and executed Sovlin.

Could've just slipped him some meat. Allergic reaction, and it's done; that omnivore cure might be good for something.

"MARCEL, GET DOWN!" the Gojid roared.

The human slowed for a second, and that gave Sovlin enough time to tackle him from behind. I realized that the Arxur had set up a sentry turret; they intended to gun down anything that passed through this area after their sweep. The monsters activated the device, as they retreated past it. Bullets zeroed in any motion in an automated stream.

Sovlin hugged Marcel's head against the shallow water, and shielded my human with his own body. Blue blood spurted from his back, as bullets clipped his spines. An entire row was ripped out, causing the Gojid to scream in agony. Despite the pain, he never wavered from his spot. As long as the duo stayed against the floor, they were below the turret's sightline.

The Tilfish hit the deck as well, before they could attract the gun's ire. Tyler retrieved his grenade launcher, though he had minimal ammunition in tow. The blond human balanced on one leg, and lined up his shot with careful precision. A projectile sailed down the tunnel, converting the turret into fragmented shards.

Sovlin struggled to his feet, and extended a clawed paw to Marcel. Tears glistened in my human's eyes; I could see him biting his lip. The primate threw his hand into the Gojid's grasp, avoiding his

gaze. The callous captain tugged my friend upright through sheer willpower. Blood was still gushing down Sovlin's back, but he wasn't stopping for first aid.

"Shit! We lost the fucking kids," my human growled. "And you…I'm not even going to ask."

The Gojid touched a paw to his bloodied back. "I know you don't want to see me."

"No shit! Tyler didn't mention a thing about you, because he knew I'd be pissed. Fuck! Do you have a ship?"

"Yes."

"Hey, exterminators? I'm sorry that the grays took so many of the kids. You and the civilian survivors want to come with us, off this rock?"

The flamethrower-wielding Tilfish shifted. "Yes, predator. Your occupation was better than theirs."

"Okay. Get these people and my friends to safety, *Sovlin*. You do that, and I'll tolerate you for that long."

Onso propped me up, as the rest of the procession made their way toward us. I still wanted a piece of Sovlin, but I couldn't get over the fact that he'd saved Marcel's life. I decided I wouldn't go after the Gojid until we were clear of Sillis. Between the vegetarian's head injury and my blood loss, neither of us should be flying.

The most important thing to me was my human's survival; a universe without him was a dark place. If Sovlin was our ticket out, then so be it.

Chapter 99

Memory transcription subject:*Glim, Venlil Rescue*

Date [standardized human time]: December 6, 2136

Noah opted to give me some space once we returned to the facility. Despite my consent to speak to him, the Gaian realized I was confused about my feelings. The warmth of his arms lingered in my mind, along with the welcome promise that everything would be okay. Predators weren't supposed to have compassion; my extermination mentor taught me that their existence was a threat.

A human knocked on my door, and peeked a helmeted head inside. I could tell from the broad shoulders and rich hands that it was Noah, checking on me. My instincts rekindled as he approached, but it was mixed with bizarre relief. Why was I happy that a deceitful hunter had come to visit?

"Hi Glim." The Gaian spoke in a gravelly voice, and seated himself on the edge of my bed. "How are you feeling?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "S-sad. L-lonely."

"Aw, you missed me, huh? It's been a hectic few days for Tarva and I, but I'm happy to see you too."

"Hectic…how?"

"We conducted a military raid against an Arxur sector. Word is, human forces liberated millions of farm captives."

"You are bringing them to Earth?"

"No. The Mazics owe us, well, the continued existence of their homeworld. They're handling a lot of the logistics."

As sensational as the story was, the Kolshians had spearheaded an attack on Khoa a short time ago. The Terrans repelled the offensive, and supposedly talked the Federation down from orbital bombings. Humans could be rather persuasive, but I found it difficult to imagine them opening a chat mid-battle. Regardless, President Cupo fawned over the United Nation in the aftermath.

I read that the Mazics commissioned a statue of a "Captain Janice Monahan" in the capital. The humans protested this act, likely to maintain humble appearances.

I flicked my ears. “Is it true that you’re building colonies in their territory?”

“Zhao has a plan to have functional settlements up and running by the end of the calendar year,” Noah growled. “The infrastructure on abandoned Mazic worlds is a good start…even if it’s not built for us.”

“I’m surprised Cupo didn’t offer to help you build from scratch.”

“Ah, he did. Get a load of this: those ‘helpers’ showed up at a potential colony with antimatter bombs. They wanted to destroy the native ecosystem! Obviously, the humans they rendezvoused with got a bit riled up.”

“Why? Those Mazics were doing the bulk of the work…making it safe for habitation.”

“Please, tell me that’s not the colony work you did. Glim, you’re too good for that.”

“C-come again? I w-was a good exterminator.”

“Never mind. Before I ask what I came here to ask, how much do you know about our political situation?”

The Gaians had solidified an unlikely coalition, and put the infamous events of a predator refugee stampede (with explosions) to bed. The hyper-capitalist Fissans and Nevoks buried their rivalry enough to resupply the human fleet. The Takkans were major contributors to Earth’s manufacturing power as well. Their ambassador had been taken prisoner on Aafa over a sabotage incident, and that rubbed their brass the wrong way.

There were some parties in the human alliance, like the functionally-extinct Thafki and the distant Paltans and Sivkits, whose support was intangible. However, newcomers contributed enough to account for them. Neutrals like the Sulean-Iftali alliance rallied support, and flipped several non-aggressors to the Terran team. The occupied Harchen and Tilfish had their armadas co-opted, as part of their surrender agreements.

“I get the gist of it. You have a small core of allies,” I answered. “You would be better off, numbers-wise, if you could flip a few more neutrals to your side.”

Noah breathed a tentative sigh. “You’re right on the money. We’ve

identified a handful of non-hostile marks, mainly those who voted for a temporary truce against the Arxur. There were 107, but our… interactions with the grays turned many against us."

"The fact that you work with those demons is disgusting."

"I don't disagree. Our attack on the Arxur sector might be the diplomatic fuel we need with the Feds. We convince them that we're gearing up for an eventual war with the Dominion—"

"And you think you can get more ships."

"Yes. A few individuals from species we're targeting as allies were liberated from this sector's cattle farm; we want to return them as a sign of goodwill. We'd like the rescues to be friendly to humans, and convince their governments we're different from the grays."

Perhaps this was all some long con by the Gaians to strengthen their military. Noah just outright stated his motives with the Arxur attack; it could be collusion between the two predators, giving off the appearance of enmity. Were the humans just using the liberated cattle to gain a diplomatic edge? Would they reveal their true feelings toward us once they'd smooth-talked the neutrals?

White-hot anger scorched my chest. "Ridiculous. You have no idea what the Arxur did to people like us. How are you going to convince them to trust another predator, let alone like you?"

"I don't know. This is a long-winded way of asking you, but we want your help," the Gaian said.

My paws adhered to the smooth helmet, and I pulled it up off his face. Sincerity swirled in his piercing eyes, which bored into my skull. Part of me hated him, for reminding me of the grays' pupils searching for their next meal. How many other cattle would have helpless thoughts jogged by this face? Hell, the humans' features were more unsettling than the Arxur's purely-predator countenance.

Maybe Noah really wants this to work, but he doesn't understand our trauma. After years of captivity, most cattle want nothing to do with them.

"D-do…you know why t-they kept me alive?" I managed.

The Gaian's wrinkled lips curved down. "I can imagine. I…I am so profoundly sorry. We found multiple DNA matches to you, from cattle raised in captivity. If you want to see them—"

“Those are not my kids! I didn’t choose to conceive them, and I don’t want to look at those abominations. And *don’t* tell me it’s not their fault, because I don’t fucking care.”

“Okay. I’m sorry I brought it up. I just thought you deserved to know.”

“Stop trying to be nice! Just because you Gaians show us a little kindness, that doesn’t make any of your flaws go away. You’re selfish to want those cattle to be your friends. You’re selfish to want *me* to be your friend.”

Ambassador Noah was silent for a long moment, at a loss for how to respond. The human pulled his helmet out of my paws, and tugged it over his head. What an impeccable actor he was, if he was playing us all. The emotionless veil obscured his feelings, but I could sense his pained expression. The bulky predator rose from my bed, before marching toward the door with hasty steps.

A twinge of guilt tugged at my heart. “I’m s-sorry, Noah. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No problem,” the Gaian rumbled. “I asked if you wanted me to steer clear of you, and you said no. I misunderstood.”

“You didn’t. What I meant to say was that we’re damaged goods… myself included. It’s difficult for me to be around you even now. We can’t just forget what happened. And I can’t make any cattle sing a predator’s praises.”

“You’re right. The UN has no right to use you as a political pawn. What I asked was unfair, Glim.”

“It was, but I’ll do it. I’ll try, and we’ll see what happens.”

“Oh, thank God. I should turn you down, but the Haysi situation’s got Sara in a rut. Maybe we could start with that small issue? Haysi won’t even eat…we had to hook her up to an IV.”

“Why didn’t you start with that? Take me there.”

The predator flexed his meaty fingers, in a way that seemed to beckon me forward. The back of his helmet spit my reflection at me, which I tried not to focus on. There were dozens of Gaians working with Venlil staff, often conferring in hushed tones. The humans kept their masks on near patients, but I could see them in their full brain-melting visages in break rooms.

My surroundings looked vaguely familiar, as we passed across the linoleum floor. Noah tested the door handle, and gestured for me to enter. A masked Gaian was seated just inside the doorway, huddled against the wall with a laptop. Complex equations were on her screen, and she was typing away with a vengeance. A tissue box sat right beside the primate.

That left the logical deduction that this was Sara, the other caretaker. I'd seen the female human at the train station, with her puffy hair and softer features. Both twin beds sat empty; one had belonged to me before my escapade. Haysi, my fellow refugee who'd once run the Venlil Museum of History, was nowhere to be seen. It took me a moment to hear her scratchy breathing, hiding under the bed.

"Sara, give Glim the rundown," Noah barked.

The female human snorted. "Not much to it. Haysi saw us turn our heads to look at her, then locked herself in a closet. I felt pretty terrible for adding to her trauma."

I eyed the Gaian warily. "You n-never meant for us to find out the truth. If it makes you feel better, you can't have made it worse than Noah chasing me through the train station…shouting about his teeth."

"Canine teeth," the male predator corrected. "It worked, didn't it?"

Sara chuckled. "Don't fret, I won't be replicating that with Haysi. I'd leave her alone, if that's what she wanted. But I can't watch her waste away like this."

"Right. What else have you done to her?" I crouched next to the Gaian scientist, and ensured there was no Venlil blood residue on her suit. If she'd had a lapse and attacked, she wouldn't admit it. "Haysi was lucid when I left. Something made her snap; don't start lying again."

"You have a dickish attitude, Glim, but I'd take that over how broken Haysi is. I got her to join a video chat, and she was speaking her thoughts then. She had me take off my mask…hasn't said a word since. Something must've made it worse."

Recalling my own disgust to the sandwich-munching Gaians, I could understand why Haysi was appalled. Perhaps it was those unpigmented eyes, or the furless cheeks infused with the tinge of

their own blood. It could've simply been that looking at a predator brought back Haysi's worst memories. That was a plight I could sympathize with, and was also why it was inane that Sara had planted herself in this room.

"So you know she's upset, and you're staying around her constantly?!" I scowled at the predator, praying she wouldn't strike me down for my bravado. "W-why are you in here?"

Sara closed her laptop. "I did give Haysi space for days, but she was not eating or speaking. I thought maybe exposure therapy, just seeing that I wouldn't go berserk, might snap her out of it. Kinda like the exchange program…"

"Those Venlil talked to Gaians for weeks before. They wanted to be there!"

"Yes, I know that, but the principle—"

"Get out! Get the fuck out of here!"

My stomach did somersaults, as it dawned on me how aggressive I'd been with the predator. What was I thinking, screaming orders in her face? This was provoking retaliation; I was certain the thought was playing at Sara's mind. The human's breathing hitched, and she slowly rose to her feet. The laptop was tucked beneath her arm.

While Sara was shorter than Noah, she still loomed over me. The male human was lurking behind me, capable of piling on to his packmate's assault. I remembered the ease with which he shrugged off my blows at the train station. The Terrans could sling me around like a ragdoll, and unleash decades of combat mastery on me. For all I knew, mouthing off in their custody was a death sentence.

The Gaians are going to put me back into my place. Prey don't get to boss around superior creatures.

Sara strode past me, helmet angled toward the doorway. I shied away from her, protecting my vulnerable areas. Noah glanced at me, before wrapping an arm around his packmate's shoulder. The female scientist ducked her head, and the predators vanished from sight. I gaped in bewilderment, amazed that Sara just…left, exactly as I told her to.

My paws strode over to Haysi. I found the Venlil historian with her face pressed against the tile, and staring with unblinking detachment. It reminded me of Aunt Thima's glassy gaze at the

facility, devoid of thought. I knelt beside the bed, and reached out to intertwine my tail with hers.

Haysi screamed, as she felt physical contact. “NO!! STOP!”

“Easy! It’s me, Glim.” I yanked my tail back, and lowered my head to the floor. “Remember me? The one that got away?”

“I t-thought they k-killed you. Escape w-was…”

“A death sentence with t-the Arxur. Listen to me, the Venlil out there are happy. These Gaians allow a decency quality of life, and they passed an empathy test.”

“C-cheated.”

“Why do you say that? If you know something I don’t, we need to make a plan. We *need* to play the game, Haysi. What did the Gaians do?”

“I k-know what they are…the second I saw Sara’s face. H-human. Terrible.”

“Yes, their most common name is human. They told me too.”

“They didn’t tell me. I s-studied them…at the museum.”

Curiosity piqued my interest, and I wondered what exactly Haysi knew about our caretakers. The Federation had accrued evidence to support our extermination plans; humanity’s war-stained history wasn’t one they tried to hide. What could they do more atrocious than being a predator and killing each other? What had this Venlil seen that was so horrible that it stuck with her post-captivity?

“Just breathe. You can tell me everything.” I coaxed her out from under the bed, and squeezed her tail for comfort. “What did you see at the museum?”

“W-well. I wanted to create an exhibit on humans that was about more than just their wars,” Haysi explained. “T-the Federation…the Farsul Archives were happy to send over unfiltered broadcasts. Those m-monsters act like us one minute, but they are vicious beyond comprehension.”

“It’s okay. They’re not here now. Go on.”

“W-where do I start, describing pure evil? That was what my exhibit on humans was called: Pure Evil.”

“I would think that title is reserved for the Arxur.”

“T-the g-grays don’t pretend at least. Humans would talk about marriage and love, but I saw documentation of them physically beating the people they said they loved. They would talk about community, then talk about *murderers* on the loose for unfathomable crimes. They would say they loved nature, then mount animal heads on their walls.”

My eyes widened in horror. “What?!”

“That’s not the least of it, Glim. They treated their own kind like cattle throughout history; selling them, locking them up in pens, and forcing them to toil. Whether they eat us or not, they’re prepping the infrastructure now. They already know how to run sapient slaves just like the grays.”

“But…Noah isn’t like that. The empathy tests…”

“The empathy tests make it worse! They feel everything they say they do, then disregard that trait entirely. It makes them better manipulators, and that’s why they evolved it. Do you seriously trust this Noah?”

I leaned back on my haunches, thinking for a long moment. Haysi seemed lucid enough to me; she must’ve been dissociating around Sara. If she’d witnessed humanity performing such depraved acts, that explained why the mask reveal sent her spiraling. The Venlil historian was willing to consider that a predator might be okay, but not this particular species. Wasn’t that telling?

Noah admitted that he wanted to use the cattle to gain military assets. How do you know he wasn’t pretending to care about you?

“The fact that you didn’t answer immediately means the answer is no,” Haysi asserted.

I twitched my ear. “It m-means I’m not sure. Are you sure t-that they uniformly deserve death?”

“As an exterminator, *you* should have that answer. I’m certain that their presence is a bad thing, and they can’t behave like a civilized race for long.”

There was at least a grain of truth in her claims, proven by the ongoing war with the Federation. Humans needed to suppress empathy to work with child-eating Arxur at all. It was difficult to trust a species that displayed all the right cues, then turned to predatory wickedness without warning. Nonetheless, Noah had

been the only steady presence on my homeworld; he comforted me when everything I loved was gone.

Maybe the Gaian was exploiting the fact that I had nothing left on Venlil Prime. That shrewd intelligence must've realized that my caretaker was the only sense of stability I had.

I cleared my throat. "I understand. You need to take better care of yourself, Haysi. You're making them pay more attention to you with all this."

"Why? What's the point of anything, with humans infesting our home?" she hissed.

"If you're right about their intentions, and t-they decide us cattle are too much trouble…they'll just skip to the worst phase. We could eke out a few months of happiness, for millions of Venlil who've also suffered like us."

"That happiness is a lie. This only ends with our t-torment."

"It's kinder than the grays, either way. Please, play along with this 'rehabilitation.' If not for yourself, do it for the others."

The female Venlil thought for several minutes, before mumbling a reluctant agreement. I eased her onto the bed, and strode out to find Noah in a daze. Ascertaining humanity's true intentions was my top priority; everything Haysi discussed must be researched. What bothered me most was that amidst atrocities, the Gaians proclaimed their emotional sensitivity. There could be no explanation for that behavior.

It would require calculation to determine whether to broach the subject with the Terran ambassador. Noah stated he was used to answering dark questions, but some subjects might cross the line. If the Gaians thought I knew too much of their history, that offer to help with cattle accommodations could vanish. The relative freedom I enjoyed now could be whisked away with it.

The suicidal side of my brain wanted to spill everything to the dark-skinned human all the same. I desired for him to hold me in his strong arms, and tell me that everything was going to be okay. It was no wonder the predators had enraptured Venlil Prime with their charm. Even a captive exterminator like myself couldn't help but to fall for it.

Chapter 100

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 6, 2136

The Prophet-Descendant had grown irritated, as Shaza's spectacle dragged on at Sillis. The female Chief Hunter had failed to mop up the human remnants; she had sacrificed her entire sector, and not even taken the planet she lost her assets to capture. So when Giznel summoned me to a physical location, I figured it was for my input on that debacle. What else could be too sensitive to discuss on comms?

Before I returned to my duties, I parsed through Jones' tooth drive. The human general had included instructions on how to search for bugs. I turned my shuttle upside-down before retrieving my secret holopad. My defective side compelled me to answer Felra, who had been persistent in checking in on me.

We ended up chatting for hours. The Dossur discussed her favorite celebrities, her days training to be a ship inspector, and how the war affected her, among other topics. Felra was unfazed by my non-answers; if anything, it seemed to encourage her nosiness. The prospect of discussing my life made me feel fraudulent and exposed. How could I ever explain anything genuine about myself?

By the way, I'm the Arxur Chief Hunter responsible for the deaths of millions. Don't mind that.

The Dossur sent a request for a video chat, and that paralyzed me in my seat. Just when I'd begun to ease my guard, there was the reminder that friendship was impossible. I told her that I was on the way to meet my boss, which I suppose was true. Felra (damn her) pleaded that a few minutes would make her day.

Why wasn't I able to refuse that request? It took me a few seconds to set my video to off, and apply a voice modulator filter to my audio. This was all going to come to an end, when she asked why I'd switched off my camera and disguised my voice. There was no prey-like explanation to that effect.

"Siffy! Oh…" A young Dossur with ginger-and-white fur blinked onto my screen. "Where's your video? You can't be that ugly, man; I

showed my face."

I drew a shuddering breath. "Felra…I don't know how to say this."

"Robotic voice. Okay, not gonna lie, this is creepy. Are you actively hiding everything about yourself, or trying to be weird?"

"It's better if the camera is off, and if you don't hear my real voice. I'm a predator."

Felra was silent for a long moment, mulling over my confession. I could see the gears spinning in her beady eyes, before her nostrils twitched with surprise. The Dossur proceeded to express relief, followed by a bout of laughter. She gave me an encouraging ear flick, which wasn't the reaction I was expecting.

"You're a human!" she exclaimed. "That explains everything; why you're so closed off and peculiar. Uh, no offense. I wondered what you all were like."

I recoiled in my pilot's seat, hissing in disbelief. That was not the interpretation I intended for her to take, but I suppose it was a good cover. Perhaps that would lend an excuse for my social ineptitude, though it was unfair to the Terrans' reputation. Humans were more than capable of chatting it up, and mimicking emotions in appropriate ways.

Felra is definitely going to have the wrong impression of humans. If she talked to one of them, she'd never have suspected a thing.

I decided not to confirm or deny her assertion. "What do you think of humans?"

"Well, I think if you'd befriend a species like the Dossur, you can't be all bad. Even the Arxur recognize that we're shitty cattle," she answered. "Oh, and I think it was shit that the Krakotl attacked your homeworld. I can see why you have some walls up talking with an alien…just saying, wasn't us."

"Wait, so you're not bothered by me being a predator? I'm not anything like an average human, to be frank. My emotions deviate far from a Terran baseline."

"You told me you deserved to be alone, and I'll assume it was because of that. I'm sorry that your culture made you feel that way. If you feel safe reaching out to me, I'm honored."

"I…I see. And the Federation? What do you think of them?"

“I understand the whole cultural tampering, and that I should feel hatred…but honestly? We would’ve never industrialized without their uplift. How would we build great machines from scratch? Even walking…we use carts to traverse alien cities.”

I guffawed in spite of myself, picturing this creature perched on a motorized stand. Felra made a valid point about the Dossur’s debt to the Federation. Had those meddlers not noticed the native wildlife bore signs of sapience, Mileau would be a different planet today. In their particular case, outside intervention was necessary to facilitate their advancement.

Felra flashed her tiny front teeth. “Don’t laugh at me! Let me guess; humanity will look down on us for our size?”

“Ah, I cannot speak for Earth,” I growled awkwardly. “My assessment is that many Terrans will want to pick you up or pet you. Humans think small animals are…*cute*.”

“But you don’t?”

“I don’t debase myself by infantilizing creatures! It’s not something I’ve given active thought to.”

“Testy, are we?”

“I am insulted by the premise! As if I could find an alien cute, and do that whole fawning expression and baby voice.”

“I wouldn’t mind. I bet you could do it well. Please, show me this baby voice? No filter?”

“GRRR! Very few herbivores try to rile up a predator!”

“Well, I’m a special gal, Siffy. You’re sure funny when you’re fired up.”

“I am tired of this conversation! I said I was only speaking for a little bit, and I don’t want to hear from you for a few hours!”

I hung up with a huff, refocusing on the landing protocols. Despite my best attempts to scare Felra off, I’d only seemed to invite provocation. With such important tasks ahead, I needed to quash whatever of my defective side had arisen. Prophet-Descendant Giznel was hosting our meeting in an unmanned station, and he had just confirmed my docking request.

Focusing on neutralizing my expression, I steeled myself for Betterment’s unavoidable demands. My shuttle coasted down at a

leisurely pace; the time to clear my thoughts was welcome. If Giznel ever learned that I was befriending prey from *my sector*, he'd see that my head was removed from my shoulders. There could only be my fanatic persona among my people.

Imagine how much better life would be, if I were a human. I wouldn't have all this…baggage to my name.

The shuttle slotted into the docking clamps, and I heaved a weary sigh. At least my disdain for Shaza didn't require acting. If I could persuade Giznel to withdraw from Sillis, that would take a weight off the UN's back. There was also valuable information I could attain for General Jones; it was my role to keep Earth apprised of threats.

Giznel was without his normal guards, and I contemplated whether I could get away with killing him. Betterment likely knew who he was meeting with today; he'd be replaced by a Descendant not as partial to me. Assassination was a surefire way to blow my cover. I disembarked, dipping my head with respect.

"Isif. We are alone here," Giznel hissed. "I have important matters to discuss, free of lesser ears."

I narrowed my eyes. "Hallowed Prophet—"

"Drop the Venlilshit. I know everything."

The Dominion leader's proclamation chilled my bones, and the debate of whether to strike him down renewed in my mind. Giznel said on the call that he doubted my loyalty; he didn't believe I was willing to clash with the Terrans. Perhaps General Jones had been right about me tipping my true allegiance off to Betterment. Was this the moment where I'd be executed for my defectiveness?

"I don't know what you mean, Your Savageness," I growled evenly.

Giznel bared his teeth. "I think you do. I wondered why you coddle the humans, and I knew it was more than Shaza's report stated. You imitate them and chase after them at every turn. But now I get it; you think they're smarter than us."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. I couldn't make sense of it, until I replayed our conversation during the prisoner execution. You talked about 'maximizing our resources' and obtaining entire planets as our

catch."

"I did, but I don't see…"

"You think the humans can solve all our problems. You think they're smarter, and they hunt in the optimal way. Those Zurulian 'pets' you took were given to the Terrans to earn goodwill. Tell me I'm wrong, Isif."

"No, I suppose you're not. Perhaps this is treasonous, but we could do better. The humans can feed us, and I could make it happen."

"There's the truth. Then, we can conquer the Federation and go on our merry way, yes?"

"Stronger. Capable."

Fear surged in my veins, but I met Giznel's stare with feigned impassivity. The Prophet-Descendant was off on the extent of my motives, though he'd discerned some of the truth. Questioning Betterment was the highest form of treason; I had just admitted that I didn't think the Arxur way was the superior one. My champions were empathetic, leaf-licking predators. Why hadn't he signed me up for execution?

"You're right that humans could alleviate our food shortages. But you're wrong about it making the Dominion stronger," Giznel said.

What? That wasn't what he was supposed to say.

The Prophet-Descendant heaved a sigh. "If we get fat and lazy, Isif, we will be susceptible to future attacks. You don't appreciate what you don't have to struggle for."

"With respect…the humans are a strong culture, and they're well-fed. A warrior culture."

"The humans have weak individuals, because they have a cushion to provide for them. What happens to Betterment when the food problem is resolved? How do we keep the masses on the right path?"

"Cruel One, are you saying that you want our people to starve?"

"Precisely. It keeps them dependent on us, and hating the Federation. The prey aren't fully to blame for our woes, but the masses don't need to know that."

"You mean because we don't try to solve the food problem."

“No. Isif, the Prophets and our inner circle have kept this secret close to the vest. Never mention what I’m about to tell you to anyone, yes?”

It was difficult to process this rhetoric, but I tilted my head to show I was listening. The Federation had admitted their culpability, when Nikonus discussed the meat-allergy serum. Was Giznel implying that Betterment was complicit in the cure’s spread? That was not a logical conclusion, since the volunteers weren’t weeded through as a culling of the weak.

“My silence can be counted on, Your Savageness. I am honored,” I managed.

Giznel lashed his tail against the floor. “Very well. The Federation was fully responsible for the cure, which caused many Arxur to starve. The Northwest Bloc, under the Prophet’s guidance, seized the moment to weaken the Morvim Charter.”

“I…how so?”

“The cattle virus was unleashed on the Charter’s livestock by us. The ‘cure’ was the perfect cover; we could blame it on the aliens, and not break the truce. But it spread across our borders, somehow. We lost our food to our own bioweapon.”

“It wasn’t all the Kolshians. So billions of Arxur starved, because of rivalries from the world war?”

“Yes, and it was a blessing in disguise. It helped Betterment solidify control. It made the entirety of Wriss see things our way!”

My maw hung agape, as I fitted this new information into my past knowledge. That explained why Chief Nikonus had denied the cattle allegations during Cilany’s interview; the Kolshians had no part in slaughtering livestock with pathogens. The herbivores deserved our hatred, but the worst blow to Arxur civilization was self-inflicted. That entirely altered my perspective of why we were starving.

It could have just been a few hundred thousand volunteers killed by the cure. Instead…my entire race has been reduced to animals.

I was livid at the Betterment office for perpetrating such falsehoods. There were so many factions that could use this information; General Jones needed this on her desk promptly. The Arxur rebels, who were searching for fuel to resist Betterment, could gain support too. Even non-defective citizens would seek consequences against

those responsible for starvation.

This revelation could destabilize the Dominion's grasp on society, just as Cilany had crippled the Federation. Unfortunately, Giznel wasn't stupid enough to blab about this to a reporter. I was his lone confidant, and I had no proof that such claims weren't Terran propaganda. Betterment could dismiss me as a human sympathizer, if I spoke out to my peers.

"So you see, we need to maintain the balance of power, Isif. If there was a surplus of food, that would spell the end for us," Giznel concluded. "I need you to limit your trade and…infatuation with the humans."

I forced a neutral expression. "Of course. I would not wish to weaken Betterment. You needed only to say as much."

"Good. As for ending the war…the Federation doesn't want the war to end any more than we do. The Kolshians and the Farsul couldn't maintain control over such a large herd without an enemy."

"They hate us! They wish we didn't exist."

"Oh, of course they do. But there's a reason they teach other prey to run away and never attack. If we pressed the Federation core worlds, I have a hunch they could muster up their numbers all of a sudden."

Giznel's theory made gruesome sense, the longer I contemplated it. It explained why the Kolshians mounted a bold-faced offensive on Terran allies, but never went after Dominion worlds and outposts. The United Nations wasn't content to raid a few planets and call it a day; nor did they plot a forever war for control. The humans sought peace and reconciliation, and that made them an immediate threat.

Zhao wants to destroy the Federation. Add in exposing the truth about omnivores…humans set that in motion.

"That theory holds water." I blinked my eyes, and my thoughts drifted to Felra. The Dossur were at risk of attack just for siding with the humans. "Our cruelty helps the ringleaders keep the other prey afraid."

Giznel chuckled to himself. "I knew you would get it, Isif. You're more cunning than Shaza, so I'm asking you for a favor. Do you still think you can handle humans?"

“Of course I do. I’m not the Chief Hunter that lost my sector to them.”

“Then handle this fucking mess. I want the battle of Sillis ended at once, with as many assets recovered as possible. If you think you can talk the monkeys into a truce, do it.”

“Easy enough. It’s not my sector though. What do I do about Shaza’s forces?”

“Those are your forces now. I’m putting her sector under your control, effective immediately. While you’re getting a handle on the situation…dispose of Shaza.”

“It will be handled, Cruel One. I will summon my fleet and leave for Sillis at once.”

The Prophet-Descendant watched with calculating eyes, as I clambered back into my shuttle. The advice that endangered my cover had earned me greater power today. In retrospect, negotiating with the humans was the less humiliating option. There was a lot to unpack from the Dominion’s secrets, but my first order of business was eliminating Shaza.

Getting the United Nations to cease hostilities would be the most difficult part. However, a continuing battle was not beneficial to Earth’s cause. Humans were a spiteful bunch, but I’d try my best to find a diplomatic resolution.

Chapter 101

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 7, 2136

Prophet-Descendant Giznel, it turned out, had taken the liberty of mobilizing my fleet to a nearby location. With a strike force already assembled, it was a short voyage to Sillis' system. FTL disruptors were active solely within the bounds of the planet's gravity well; the Terrans didn't expect us to bring reinforcements. It was known to the United Nations that our warlords acted independently to each other.

I suppose they knew it was an exercise in futility, even if FTL-disruptors had smacked us out of transit. The battle would be lost for the humans as soon as new ships arrived, since the Arxur's solitary nature didn't prevent us from joining in. To be candid, I couldn't comprehend how Earth's measly showing had resisted Shaza's bruisers this long. The Terrans had a lot of mettle in them.

The Arxur Dominion will respect their tenacity and gumption, if a bit grudgingly. I question whether the humans will fight to the last man though.

As my fleet entered real space, we ensured that our forces were positioned out of firing range. I didn't want to get dragged into the fight before I could open a channel. The Terrans were shooting Arxur vessels on sight, and they would assume we were bailing out Shaza. I had to assure them my intentions ran against this sector's Chief Hunter.

The UN vessels swiveled to face us, rather than panicking like prey crews. During our arrival, they hadn't been engaged with Shaza's forces; the humans were content keeping the enemy at bay. The stubborn primates must realize they were backed into a corner now, which would force them to the negotiating table.

"Attention, all Arxur vessels in the system," I growled into my comms, ensuring that my channel was unencrypted. "This is Chief Hunter Isif; by order of Betterment, I am assuming control of your fleet. You are to *immediately* stand down and await further instruction. I say again: cease *all* hostile actions."

The Dominion vessels marauding Sillis halted the meticulous bombing, and I was surprised by their lack of hesitation. Shouldn't there have been a power struggle, as Shaza issued a counter-order? Gauging by her personality, that Chief Hunter would never respect my decree to stand down. I studied the viewport in shock, before extending a hail to the human fleet.

A female Terran, with reddish hair that halted just shy of her shoulders, accepted my call. Hostility was written on her countenance, though sleep deprivation was visible in her puffy eyes. The UN officer bared her teeth all the same, and stared down the camera. I was unimpressed by humans attempting intimidation on me.

"I recognize you. The famed Captain Monahan…savior of Khoa," I said in a sugary voice. "After that success, I'm not surprised you're first in line for combat negotiations."

Monahan's scowl deepened. "What is it you're seeking?"

"A ceasefire. I wish to negotiate an immediate end to hostilities, and regain control of our assets. Is that an amenable proposition to the United Nations?"

"There will be no end of hostilities; not while you're taking humans as cattle. We'd rather take a lot of you with us, than let you make off with our men and women."

"What?! We don't take you as cattle. Are there prisoners or…ahem. Excuse me one moment."

The human captain's eyes fluttered with surprise, and she inspected my mannerisms for several seconds. As I scrambled through a log of internal communications, a video message was forwarded from the *UNS Rocinante.* Monahan had relayed the information for me; I hastily listened to Shaza's transmission. Shock must've been visible on my agape maw, but I couldn't force it shut.

Had that maniacal Chief Hunter actually threatened to corral humans like Venlil? No wonder the United Nations was digging in their heels with such spite. That also explained why this sector's Dominion forces complied with my takeover; Shaza alienated her own troops by trying to eat fellow predators. After the Terrans fended off such an overzealous attack, there was no way of classing them as prey.

The average soldier knew this action wouldn't be condoned by Betterment. It flies against our entire ideology of superiority. It's next to cannibalistic!

I drew a shuddering breath. "The captives' release will be facilitated by me, personally. On behalf of the Arxur Dominion, I can assure you we do not support this act in any way. I apologize for Shaza subjecting humans to degrading conditions, which are becoming only of prey."

"Only becoming of prey?" My qualifier served to make Monahan recoil in disgust. "So if there's an herbivore who served with us, captured, you won't release them? That's not good enough."

"I should think the release of all humans is a good start."

"Everyone under the UN emblem is equal to us. I am not trading lives with you."

"Some is more than none, yes?"

I knew leaving their newfound allies, such as the Venlil, to die was a non-starter from the United Nations. However, Giznel would have my hide if he discovered I'd released the prey with no pushback. It also would suit my motives to gain food in return, given the sector's depleted cattle farms. Betterment might be happy with starvation, but I wished to resolve that issue for any troops under my control.

A full belly was one way to buy loyalty for a future rebellion. General Jones would understand why I drove a hard bargain with the UN, and why I had to accumulate as many assets as possible. However, it was unclear if the average Terran officer was amenable to hardball. The female human on screen had tensed up again; she was digging her fingernails into her seat.

Captain Monahan pursed her lips. "We have nothing to talk about, since you won't budge from that stance."

"If you don't like my offer, you could make a counter," I said. "I am just supposed to guess at what you want? Make it worth my while, and I'll consider returning your…prey creatures."

"I don't know what *you* want! I presume to bomb Sillis unimpeded?"

"The Tilfish attacked your cradle world. *You* asked us to retaliate against your aggressors. There's no, tssk, takebacks as you say. I

find your attempts to distance yourselves from this fiasco immature."

"The United Nations will never condone genocide! We're not on their level. That was a regrettable gamble, in which we had no choice."

"You were quite happy to accept my ships, human, when I saved your Earth. Don't let your short memories fail you now. There would be no fleet to fight Shaza and her Sivkit-brained ensemble without me."

The Terran captain's glower faltered. "…that was you?"

"Yes. I rescued your species from functional extinction. I had you at my mercy, and I let you be. I think you will find that my policies align with your interests. So I'll state my demands forthright, but you *are* going to listen."

"For Earth, I will humor you. Our devastating losses could've been worse. Much worse."

The medals pinned to Monahan's uniform had tipped me off to her participation in humanity's last stand. It was a relief that the reminder of my aid went over better than it had with Secretary-General Zhao. Perhaps some lab-grown meat and a territorial concession would be palatable to the Terran higher-ups. All Giznel demanded was ending the battle and getting the sector back under our control.

As long as I achieve his stated ends, I'll appear more competent than Shaza. Not that that's saying much.

I narrowed my eyes to slits. "You've taken much from us. The return of this sector, alongside a non-aggression pact with Arxur outposts under my domain, is non-negotiable."

"We know what you'll do to those sapients you had. Returning them to your custody is unethical, and would be a ghastly reflection on the UN."

"Forget the cattle. I expect compensation. I want some of the farm animals in your possession on Earth…the ones you certainly don't have just for specialty meats."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Learn quickly. Otherwise, I might accidentally leak a dossier on

‘factory farming’ and ‘safari hunting’ to Zurulian communication satellites. I’m sure you wouldn’t want that.”

The color drained from Monahan’s cheeks. “That is quite unnecessary.”

“It will be, when you comply with my reasonable requests. All Terran ships will stand down at once. In return, I will retrieve any UN captives, including non-humans, for you. We will leave Sillis, but I expect future negotiations on that concession.”

“So we’re just supposed to stand down, and trust that you’ll hand over our side of the deal later?”

“Precisely, because I keep my word. There is precedent: I returned the Venlil cattle per a similar arrangement. If I say I’ll return your people, consider it done.”

“What about the Tilfish civilians? They were under our protection.”

“…you people make no sense. Fine, you can have your human-killing bugs. But there better be more heads of cattle that we get back than we gave away.”

“I’ll take that into consideration, Isif. Is that all?”

“For now. Go call the higher-ups with those FTL comms you definitely don’t have access to. I’ll be waiting.”

I terminated the call, satisfied at the threats I’d chosen to lobby at Captain Monahan. Sharing their predatory traits with their allies wasn’t something the UN did in laborious detail. However, humans being kept as cattle was unacceptable to me, even if a deal wasn’t solidified. Gesturing to an underling, I summoned a shuttle bound for Shaza’s fleet.

A security detail accompanied my transport, equipped to handle any resistance. It took a few seconds to fire off an encrypted transmission, requesting the locations of Shaza and her human captives. Dominion vessels did not fire upon my transport; acknowledgments flooded in, kowtowing to my status. Arrogant as ever, the female Chief Hunter had Terran prisoners routed to her personal command ship.

That placed both of my objectives in the same location. Genuine anticipation of the kill thrummed in my chest. It would be delightful not to feign pleasure during an execution; eliminating

Shaza was a step forward for my species. What kind of Arxur got bested by feisty predators, and reacted with vulgar threats? Betterment would never support her actions, which were unbecoming even of their office.

My pupils scanned the command ship, which was a bulky giant with gratuitous armor. Ornaments resembling prey heads decorated the hull, and multiple decks allowed for a hearty amount of cattle onboard. My shuttle was dwarfed by the colossal ship; its size was impractical in combat action. The rogue Chief Hunter cared too much for projecting strength, enough to sacrifice all mobility.

As I closed in on Shaza's command post, the human fleet reopened a hail. My patience had been dwindling with their government; this wasn't the time for deliberation. It shouldn't be difficult for Captain Monahan to relay a straight answer. The social predators shouldn't be chattering amongst themselves during a crisis.

General Jones claimed humans don't want war with the entire Dominion. The UN has to work with me for that reason.

Monahan breathed a flustered sigh. "I'll get to the point. Secretary-General Zhao signed off on the deal, if you throw in one sweetener. Transfer Shaza to our custody."

"Oh, that is your kicker? I could not care what happens to her," I chuckled. "We are much like independent warlords on your world. I was going to execute her, but I suppose that also fits my orders to 'dispose of her.'"

"Excellent. While I have your attention, Zhao asked me to tell you something else. He says he is…sorry for his conduct. Whatever that means."

"Well, I think your species cherishes empty words more than mine does. I'll arrange the transfer, human. Don't do anything stupid."

I cut the transmission once more, and reminded myself that it was irrational to hold a grudge. Still, I had zero interest in reassessing Zhao's affronts on a call. General Jones had misled him, but that didn't erase the fact that he treated me like an animal. If the UN leader saw all Arxur as savages, that wasn't something I intended to forgive lightly.

Then again, if I considered it with sincerity, Felra would say the same things about me…and worse. My friendship with the Dossur

was a grave error of judgment. The fact that she assumed any cordial predator was a human spoke volumes about our repute versus theirs. Everyone thought we were monsters who deserved what happened to us. Considered that our plight was somewhat self-inflicted, they might be right.

A jolt rippled through the shuttle, as we latched onto Shaza's command ship. I gestured for my security detail to raise their weapons; my paw hovered over my sidearm as well. But no gunfire greeted us upon entry, nor was there any sign of hostile intent. Instead, a wall of guards had the disgraced Chief Hunter on her knees. Her right eye was bloodied and swollen shut, which presented some obvious questions.

Shaza looked indignant, despite the pistol planted against her skull. "Isif. Those insolent apes just wouldn't let it go! They're chest-beating monkeys with nothing but cheap tricks."

"Any normal Arxur would respect a worthy opponent in combat. Tell me, why do you think your people are so eager to restrain you?"

"The humans need to be humbled! My minions here don't see that I had to impart that lesson…in a way they'd remember."

"Oh, they'll remember alright. We do not eat fellow sapients. There is *one* other predator in the galaxy, and you cannot treat them with respect?!"

"They're stupid and emotional. It's their weakness. When they see their kind herded up, it will break them."

"I suspect your ploy merely pisses the humans off, Shaza. Nice shiner you've got there, is it not?"

"Quit your mockery! The one I took as my personal meal…it jabbed its thumb in my eye and started twisting. Awful wretch! I carved it up very slowly for that. Those 'predators' scream just the same as Venlil, though the taste leaves something to be desired."

A wave of cold disgust washed over me. "You *actually* ate a human?!"

"Yes, very chewy. Listen, those captives might keep fighting today, but they will give up and cower in time. Let the cattle experiment go on. Surely Betterment—"

I lunged at the Chief Hunter, throwing my maw into the side of her temple. Shaza crumpled into a heap, and my hide quivered with revulsion. It would be ironic to torture her into "screaming like a Venlil" now; that would invalidate her prior argument. Pain wasn't exclusionary to prey, after all. It was a shame the humans requested her alive, so I couldn't have any fun breaking her will.

My gaze swept around the room, inspecting her forces. "The battle of Sillis is over! Betterment would rather point our guns at prey than predators. We'd rather *eat* prey than predators. If any of you have a problem with that, there are several airlocks with your name on it. I suggest you use them."

The assembled Dominion soldiers nodded, and hauled the unconscious Shaza to her feet. My security detail helped them cart her onto a transport; bindings were applied to her lithe form, ensuring that she couldn't stir up mayhem. I debated how to return the human cattle, without having them gouge out our eyes. It needed to be crystal clear that we were not aligned with the former Chief Hunter.

"Ready that transport, and prep several more. Load all UN captives on there, *unharmed* and of their own volition," I growled. "Before you release any penned humans, please reiterate that we're there to free and return them. State that we have an explicit agreement with their government. Also, allow them to fly the shuttles back to their fleet on their own."

One of my security guards bared his teeth. "What happens when they see Shaza on the first ship?"

"Tell them that the human cattle was her idea, and she's a rogue warlord. Also tell them…they can do whatever they want with her. She was left on that shuttle as a gift!"

The Arxur underling chuckled to himself, picturing the furious humans brutalizing her. I found Shaza's circumstances quite amusing as well. This was likely not what Secretary-General Zhao had in mind, by asking me to hand her over to UN custody. But on a technical level, my decision was in full compliance with his request. I'd fulfilled my end of the bargain, while having some malicious fun at her expense.

Once this situation was resolved, the humans could return their attention to the Federation. That was where their focus belonged; it

would also save me from the awkward position of mediating this dispute. My next priority was heading to a dead drop location, so that General Jones could learn what Giznel had revealed. Perhaps the Terrans could devise a way to utilize the information for insurgency.

Chapter 102

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 7, 2136

Our shuttle had escaped Sillis' atmosphere unnoticed, and we docked with Captain Monahan's ship in a hurry. Almost all of our posse was shipped to the infirmary, after the injuries we picked up along the way. The Tilfish exterminators and their civilian trustees had looked petrified, boarding a predator warship. General Birla was equally frightened, though Virnt seemed ready to run laps around the vessel.

The Arxur turret gave me a close shave, though I was able to save Marcel. The human doctors informed me that my damaged spines would never regrow, due to a degenerative condition. That was not surprising to me, given my advancing age. Gojids could develop new quills in our youth, since they evolved to ward off predators. However, as we got older, hormones prevented regrowth in many males.

"Like human balding?" Samantha had asked, as she listened to the physician's prognosis with me. "Shit, Spiky's going bald! Not to be an ass…but Carlos and I are totally going to rib you."

Thus, when the olive-skinned male visited, I expected some irksome jokes at my behest. Instead, the soldier looked concerned by the bandages encircling my torso. He informed me of the battle's developments, though he saved the best news for last. The Arxur had collapsed before the humans did, and called for a ceasefire. Sillis wasn't going to suffer the same fate as the cradle.

I can't help but wonder how the Terrans persisted for so long. Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen a UN soldier tire while walking… except for Tyler when he twisted his ankle.

"So that means we can send the Tilfish home, and head back to Earth myself," Carlos concluded. "You think you can, uh, come with me to share the news with our…guests? I need some moral support."

I cast my gaze at the floor. "I've been staying in here. Trying to stay out of Marcel's hair."

The quiet spell alone gave me unwelcome time to ruminate, and my thoughts swirled around with fury. I couldn't tell which voices were real or imagined. Distant profanity was audible in a Venlil's register, which hinted that Slanek was near. There were a few things I swore I heard Marcel say as well, in the broken bits I caught.

"I've decided…to…Sovlin. He's pretty…up," was one of the more ominous lines. "I'm just gonna do it, right here…now. It's been consuming me…too long."

It was possible the red-haired human was referring to his bloodlust; I could imagine the urge to harm me had been overwhelming during my prison stint. Our unwelcome reunion must've stirred up nasty memories. It was remarkable that he stuffed it down long enough to escape Sillis. However, something in my heart told me Marcel wouldn't surrender his morals so easily.

"Yoohoo, wake up!" Carlos sang. "I don't ask you for much, man. *Please*, just help me with the chest-high spiders. I'm begging you."

"Hm…explain those green markings on your arms, and I will go with you. Sam told me you're in a cult when I asked her. I said, 'Like the Cult of Inatala?'"

"And what did she say?"

"'Exactly like that, but with more blackjack and hookers.' I think she's lost it."

Carlos threw his head back, howling with laughter. "Oh, Sovlin, try actually looking at it! This one is a picture of a tree, with the words 'Strength through pain.' The other tattoo is a bear, which…yes I'm aware it's a predator. But it's two dual icons of strength and confidence."

"I see. Why would you have this drawn on yourself?"

"It's a reminder. Whatever happens to me, I will be enduring as a tree and fierce as a bear. Our past doesn't define us."

"That is a nice gesture, though I cannot unsee the p-predator now. Fuck…you idolize that beast?! Never mind, let's go see the Tilfish."

The UN guard let me out of the medical bay, and I studied each room with nervous eyes. Which one was Slanek hiding behind, ready to remind me that I deserved death? The Venlil was right

about the justified consequences for my actions; perhaps he could persuade Marcel to get the revenge he deserved. That wasn't what frightened me. It was the prospect of them conversing with me, showing mercy together, that twisted the knife.

I'm thankful it was dead quiet on the shuttle ride. I don't know if I can bring myself to speak with my victim again.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips, as we ascended the stairwell to the main deck. The sound of sobbing caught my attention from within a cargo hold, and it wasn't guttural enough to be human. I focused on my periphery on instinct. The monstrous beast from Marcel's unit caught my eye; what was left of my spines poked through the bandages.

The red-haired human had hidden it at the rear of the shuttle, avoiding panic. Now, I finally got a good look at this monstrosity. The "dog" was as fearsome as the bear on Carlos' tattoo, with a shaggy pelt and fangs the length of my quills. It was nothing compared to lunging at an Arxur, but it had the lean form of a killer. Onso was crouched right beside it, and even the violent-minded Yotul was in tears at its presence.

"C-Carlos. Look. T-that thing is…making Onso cry," I stammered.

The human squinted his brown eyes. "That's odd. I didn't get the impression he was afraid of predators. Maybe it's the stress of combat that set him off?"

I crept over to the room's hallway, and peered inside. Carlos matched my furtiveness, despite wearing heavy boots on his paws. As primitive as Onso was, it would be wrong to leave him at the dog's mercy. The Yotul was part of our unit, and humans never left their packmates behind. Blond, close-cropped hair caught my eyes; Tyler knelt beside the Yotul, careful to keep weight off his injured ankle.

Perhaps the sensors officer had put his exchange program partner up to this. I could see the Terran's lips moving, and Onso nodding blankly. From the bits I was able to catch, it sounded like he was explaining what dogs were. They were pack predators that humans domesticated…to help with farming and hunting?! Tyler had one that lived with him?

That was possibly the most asinine thing I'd heard in my life, worse

than asphyxiating fish as a child. Encouraging a predator to switch on hunting mode around them was suicide; it must be difficult even for a sapient Terran to rein themselves in while searching for prey. Was this creature used to slaughter farm animals so the humans didn't have to? If dogs were that ravenous, it was more deranged that the primates let them inside their living quarters.

I tiptoed a few steps closer, and strained my ears. It was essential to hear what they were saying, so that I could intervene if necessary. The last thing that we needed was for the Yotul to pass out around this slobbering animal!

"I understand. S-so…his name is Dino?" Onso sniffled.

Tyler ran a hand over the beast's forehead, smiling. "Yeah. Marcel says that he loves Slanek, so I don't think he'll be a problem around aliens. Dogs read our social cues, so Dino knows which ones we like."

"You…l-love your dog back on Earth?"

"Sure do. I'd always feed her table food, and Pops would yell at me. She's getting older now, but she's always happy when I visit. Dogs'll miss you whether you've been gone one year or one minute."

Something about that statement snapped the last straw of Onso's composure. The Yotul turned inconsolable, and wrapped his paws around Dino's neck. The dog whined as the primitive buried his face in its coat; its jaws opened with feral intent. Its tongue leapt out of its mouth, and it impressed its slobber into the uplift's reddish-tan fur.

Tyler tilted his head with concern, and pressed a hand on Onso's back. He moved his bony fingers in soothing circles, desperately reassuring his friend. The Yotul screeched in a discordant tone, curling his claws deeper into Dino's scruff. The dog wriggled out from under him, and pressed its wet nose against his cheek. It began lapping at the uplift with repeated licks, building up a taste for his flesh.

"Talk to me, buddy. What's wrong?" the sensors officer whispered.

Sobs wracked the Yotul's body. "They killed her. They killed her! Papa shot her. Papa…"

"It's okay. You don't have to talk about it. I'm not sure what you're saying, but I'm here for you."

“If I told you what they did to us, you’d be ashamed of us. We just rolled over—”

Carlos jabbed an elbow in my side. “Sovlin! I think we’re intruding on a private conversation.”

“I…I think so too.” Sympathy clutched at my heart, seeing the brazen Yotul on the verge of a breakdown. “Let’s move on. Don’t worry, I’ll do the talking.”

The human and I slid backward, though I shot a glance back at the despairing primitive. Tyler had pulled the Yotul into a full embrace, and his form looked massive next to the herbivore. I hoped the blond Terran had everything under control; he knew his exchange partner better than I did. It left me to wonder how their first conversations were gone, and how much they’d opened up to each other.

Carlos gestured to another cargo hold, which had been converted into a group dormitory. UN sentries were posted outside the room, and they looked quite antsy. I suspected the constant watch was to prevent the insectoids from wandering the ship. Back in Kolshian territory, Carlos stated that the Tilfish ambassador “freaked him the fuck out.” Many humans found the Tilfish likeness unnerving, which still amused me.

“Watch, this is gonna be easy,” I told the male guard. “Let a master of diplomacy show you how it’s done.”

Carlos rolled his eyes. “Master of gunboat diplomacy, maybe.”

The Tilfish refugees halted their conversation, as soon as we entered the room. General Birla eyed the unknown human with wariness, and tried to move Virnt behind her. She had found Tyler daunting too, with his imposing size and icy eyes. I moved my body subconsciously, obscuring Carlos’ “bear” arm with my form.

“So, humans forced the Arxur to stand down and return any Tilfish cattle. Your planet will not be bombed to smithereens…today,” I declared. “You can go home.”

The insectoid exterminators comforted the children they’d rescued, and murmured something among themselves. I caught something about other kids being taken away in cages; my news about the cattle meant they may be returned unharmed. It was tough to trust an Arxur’s word, but the demons had started the exchange process

already.

The Terrans need to move quick enough, before the monsters break their agreement.

General Birla clicked her mandibles. “What do the humans want from us?”

“To leave their ship as soon as possible, probably. Trust me, they don’t want you here anymore than you want to be here.”

“Marcel told me…we’re symbols of disease to their brains.”

“Yeah, I mean, look at Carlos here.” I clapped a paw around the male human, and the physical touch made him jump. “See? You scare the predators. I’m sure you like that.”

“I…actually, I don’t. Do you think I could say good-bye to Marcel? He was quite kind with me and Virnt.”

“I’ll ask someone else to pass the word along. It’ll have to be soon; they want to head home in a few hours.”

“See, Virnt? We’re going home. It’s safe, and the humans—”

“NO! I WANNA GO TO EARTH. I WANNA GO TO SPACE WITH HUMMA!” Virnt wailed, in an ear-piercing tone.

“You can’t do that. For the last time, humans *don’t* like us. Earth is their—”

“HUMMA NOT LIE! NO LEAVE!”

The child’s deafening tangent morphed into incoherent screaming. Carlos pressed his hands to his ears, and keeled over at the waist. I took the opportunity to depart the room with my friend, noting the apologetic look in Birla’s eyes. The Tilfish general had tried to break it to Virnt gently, but it was obvious that they weren’t welcome on the predators’ cradle. Why was the kid so dead-set on visiting Earth?

Carlos rushed over to a water fountain, and slurped down the cool arc of liquid. The human blinked his eyes shut, before wiping his lips against his hand. He turned grateful eyes to me, and allowed himself a full-on shudder. Perhaps the experience gave him newfound sympathy for what it was like, when I first boarded this ship packed with predators.

“Thank you. I felt my throat clam up…I couldn’t speak. Now it’s

done, and we can send them home," Carlos murmured.

I chewed at my claws. "Don't mention it. That kid was a nightmare. Sooner he's back on Sillis…and screened for predator disease, the better."

"Predator disease? For throwing one tantrum?"

"There's some behavioral issue going on there. Onso is predator-diseased too, but that seems to be a species-wide thing. As someone who has some, uh, symptoms myself…I do wish I could ask for help. That I got treatment when I was young, when it might've been fixable."

"Sovlin, you have PTSD. It's caused by trauma, because of what you saw with your family."

"That's not how predator disease works."

"Per the Federation 'scientists' who don't know what an omnivore is."

Weariness tugged at my chest. "You know what? Fine, everything I ever believed or knew is a lie. Sure, whatever, seems to be the pattern. Happy?"

"Jeez, you can't temper the self-pity for ten seconds. I'll take you back to your room."

"I know where it is! I can walk back by myself."

"Be my guest."

Carlos stalked off, arms folded in the way humans used to cordon off their emotions. I bolted off in the opposite direction, and tried to regulate my breathing. The humans had to view *everything* contrary to the Federation, just to take a wrecking ball to our reality. Nothing was sacred to them, not even the most basic truths. Either I was a diseased individual who snapped, or my omnivorous species was the disease.

If anything, the trauma just helped me direct my anger issues at predators. It was the guiding mechanism.

I stomped past Onso and Tyler's cargo hold. The Yotul was tugging a rope, with a little help from his human pal; Dino had the nylon clasped between its fangs. The dog had decided this twine was its prey, and refused to let go. I wasn't sure why the primitive and his exchange partner wanted this string so desperately. At least they

weren't stupid enough to stick their paws in its mouth.

Rushing off down the stairs, I returned to the medical wing. My pace slowed down, careful to avoid detection by any other patients. The last thing I wanted was for Slanek to catch me in his sightlines; after losing so much blood, the Venlil must be tied down here. My pupils darted about, and swept for any signs of which room belonged to my victims.

One door was cracked open, which hadn't been ajar when I left. I pressed my body against the wall, and inched up to the frame's edge. After considering my options, I risked a quick glance inside. It was unmistakably the tortured human and his Venlil inside. Slanek had an IV hooked up to his bandaged arm, and was resting his head on Marcel's chest. The predator was entranced by a nature documentary from Earth, which played on the TV.

Shit. Maybe I can sneak past and they won't notice me. They're both fixated on the TV, right?

I dropped onto all fours, hoping that would help keep me below their sightline. Pain scorched down my back, as it stretched out the damaged skin. Cursing internally, I crawled ahead like a toddler; my claws made clicking sounds against the tile. I could see Marcel's hazel eyes land on me through my periphery, and watched his head pop off the pillow.

"Sovlin?" the human queried. "Come here. Slanek needs to speak with you."

I froze like cornered prey, and dread formed a knot in my stomach. It was possible to keep walking, but Marcel had every right to make demands of me. This was pure cowardice, avoiding him because I was afraid of his civility. Besides, if this human was dead-set on conversing with me, I doubted I could outrun him.

Steeling my nerves, I rose back onto my hindlegs. My heart thundered with the fury of a stampede, but I turned my feet into the room. The universe had brought me face-to-face with my victims, and now, there was no choice but to engage with them. There was no telling what his Venlil buddy would do; I would offer myself to Marcel's whims once more.

The human had a captive audience, and I'd yet to discover why he wished to speak with me.

Chapter 103

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 7, 2136

It was tough to cope with my proximity to this predator and his Venlil pal. I was standing just within the room's threshold, and resisting the urge to flee. Binocular eyes were trained on my skull; it felt like they were burning holes in my head.

My eyes wandered, attempting to look anywhere but at the human's scarred face. Marcel had placed a photograph of Slanek and himself, alongside a female Terran I didn't recognize. The curious aspect was a young Gojid, riding on the redhead's back with bright eyes. My victim was tickling her wrists, twisting his hands over his shoulders. Even in a still photograph, I could tell the child was squealing with happiness.

Why were Marcel and Slanek taking pictures with a young Gojid? Didn't the red-haired human despise our species? Just looking at that child must remind him of my likeness; I wasn't sure why he'd volunteer with our refugees. Perhaps it was an attempt at coping for him, but the fact he kept it as his selected photo…

Marcel thinks of his time with that Gojid kid as a happy memory. How can that be?

My throat felt like it was made of sandpaper. "T-the G-gojid. Who is she?"

"That's Nulia. My adopted daughter," Marcel replied in an even voice. "Slanek and I rescued her on the cradle, after she was abandoned in a stampede. She's back at home with my fiancé now."

I recoiled, unable to process why the human would adopt a Gojid child. Peering into his eyes in the photograph, the scarred predator was radiating affection. His teeth were bared in a full snarl, and Slanek was cozied up against his side too. Protector, why couldn't I have tortured an asshole Terran? Not that it would've made it more moral, but Marcel was too kind. I could not have harmed someone less deserving of cruelty.

My eyes burned, as images of Marcel in a collar flooded my mind.

Staring at his heartfelt smile, I could still picture his strained smile when Slanek came to visit. It had been my claw that pressed the shock trigger, while staring at him with absolute reproach. The cold, starving predator had seized on the floor, and struggled just to breathe. I could still hear his screams as I kicked him in the ribs…

Slanek snapped the television show off, and fixed a withering glower on me. The Venlil eyed me with murderous intent, flexing his wounded arm as if to test it. Marcel's best friend remembered the exact details I had; I could remember how desperate he was to plead the human's case. My response was to try to get him preyed upon. I would've intervened before the predator could eat the Venlil, but at best, it was an attempt to traumatize him.

Besides, there was no guarantee I could react quicker than a hunter could lunge. Poor Marcel must've resisted such terrible thoughts, just looking at Slanek.

It felt immoral to sympathize with a predator's bloodlust, but I knew he couldn't help basic, biological urges. Marcel chose to die rather than to eat his friend, and that was a remarkable show of willpower. The fact that he hadn't enacted revenge upon me showed that he was a good person; his love extended even to Gojid children.

The red-haired human shot Slanek a pointed look. "Tell Sovlin what you wanted to tell him. This hatred is poisoning your heart, and you need to let it out."

"I fucking hate you! If Recel hadn't intervened, you would've killed Marcel. You meant to put him down like a fucking animal," the Venlil screeched. "Do you know how it felt, to feel like I'd lose him? To know his last moments were *agony*? You deprived him of every basic need…I suppose he was lucky you gave him filthy water in a filthy bucket."

"I'm sorry," I offered meekly.

"What good does that do? You're out living a respected life with the Terran military, and the trauma can never be undone. My government never even got to prosecute you for how you tossed me around. *Then,* I was helpless as he clung to life, on the day-long trip to Venlil Prime. I sat beside his hospital bed, watching them put wires in his face."

“S-saw the p-pictures. T-terrible to look at.”

“It was terrible. I don’t know how you got Tyler to feel sorry for you, but he was never the brightest bulb in the box! You can keep your fucking apologies, because they aren’t worth shit!”

The Venlil started to sit up, but Marcel held him back with an arm. Slanek wriggled against the restraint, yet for some reason, the human wouldn’t let him charge at me. The prey alien reached for his IV line, and the predator intercepted his paw with nimble reflexes. I’d never seen a Venlil bare their teeth, or act with such aggression.

There was no question I deserved special animosity. Even the galaxy’s weakest race wanted to bash my face in, and I couldn’t blame him. Everything Slanek just stated was true, down to the fact that I would’ve murdered an innocent creature without Recel. The tears poured out from my eyes, and that only enraged the Venlil further. I pressed my face into my paws, wishing I could fall into non-existence.

“Relax, buddy. It’s okay,” Marcel whispered.

Slanek pinned his ears back. “STOP! I should be comforting you; he did it to you. You’re the one who has to live with the trauma. You’re the one who’s permanently disfigured!”

“Yes, and I don’t want you harming him.”

“You told me in the hospital you wanted Sovlin dead. You were fantasizing about it.”

“It wouldn’t make anything better, Slanek. I’ve been trying to make peace with what happened to me, since I learned that his family was eaten in front of him. Sovlin saved both of our lives, and I don’t wish harm upon him.”

“You said you didn’t want to see him. You were pissed he was there on Sillis.”

“I was pissed! I’m angry, I’m hurting, I’m hounded by memories when I look at his face, and…I forgive him.”

What was left of my spines bristled, and the world collapsed in on me. All I wanted was for Marcel to take those words back; they stabbed at me like daggers to the chest. I couldn’t breathe, and every part of me screamed against that forgiveness. Everyone in the

galaxy knew that Slanek's interpretation was the correct one.

I didn't deserve mercy, and my life should be forfeit for my actions. How could the predator just *forgive* what I had done to him?

"N-no. You can't do that," I croaked, fighting for air amid the narrowing of my vision.

His hazel eyes stared directly at me. "Oh, I can. I won't forget what you did, but it's time to let it go. I choose to feel compassion for you. I choose not to be a victim…and not to let hatred control me."

Marcel's stated compassion packed the force of a sledgehammer. Those simplistic words echoed in my mind, warring against concrete certainty that I must never find peace. Without self-loathing as my purpose, there was no guiding star to light my dark path. Forgiveness stripped my life of all meaning; there was no reason to persist another day.

Why should I get to live, when I couldn't protect my family?

"You just said you were angry." Speech spilled from my vocal cords, as if borne of their own volition. "You wanted me d-dead; that was good! Why would you just *forgive me*?"

"Simple. I was playing with Nulia, and she'd overheard me talking with Lucy. She said, 'Mawsle, you're mean when you talk about Sahwin.' Kid was right. It was consuming me, 'cause I hadn't let it go."

The thought lanced me. It couldn't be that simple, for a predator to cast aside his vitriol. The words of a child, who peered into his heart, caused him to forgive old wounds.

Slanek slapped his tail against Marcel's earlobe. "Listen to yourself! You're letting him get away with sadism, again!"

"I don't control his actions. I control mine, and there's power in not clinging to resentment. I won't be free from this until I set my heart free."

"You have to stand up for yourself, Marc. It's not about being the bigger person! Justice matters too, and your life has enough value to me that he deserves my disgust."

"Do you believe people can change, buddy? Because I do, and it's wrong to deny a truly repentant person a second chance. Please, for my sake, respect the fact that Sovlin is trying to do better today.

That is all he can do."

No…Marcel is insufferable. Tyler also said I deserved a second chance, and it wasn't true then. It doesn't matter that I'm doing right by them, after what I've already done.

I fell to my knees, sobbing as I had when I first realized humans had empathy. A second chance was not what I was seeking; there was no reason why my unforgivable deeds deserved a do-over. My continued existence was meant as inadequate penance for my treatment of humanity. What aid I'd given them wasn't nearly enough, though I hoped I'd made a minute difference in their war efforts.

It was tempting to believe that my reparations were sufficient. I knew my die was cast and my story was written, yet I yearned to pretend that wasn't the truth. My eyes blinked open, turning to the Venlil. Surely he would slap Marcel's folly down without hesitation.

"*Fine*," Slanek spat the word, as if it were a sour taste in his mouth.

Marcel smiled with satisfaction. "Good. Now, thank him for saving your life."

"What?! How did you—"

"Tyler told me. He explained everything, rather apologetically. We would both be dead without Sovlin, so a little thanks is in order."

"Please don't." Snot bubbled in my nose. I shook my head, desperate to rebuff any praise. "That's…n-not necessary."

"I agree." Slanek contorted his facial features into a mask of disgust. "You're taking this way too far, Marc. The concussion got to your head."

"Well then, humor a poor, sick human!" the red-haired predator chuckled. "I'll watch the new episode of that god-awful *The Exterminators* show with you, if you say thanks sincerely."

"Th…th…*thanks*, Sovlin. Bleh, that was vile."

"I said sincerely."

"I'm glad Marcel is alive." Slanek spoke through gritted teeth. "Er, thanks for not trying to slice and dice him again."

"You've got to be kidding me. That's the best you can do?!"

"That…it was sincere," I sniffled, buying time to regain composure.

“Technically meets your criteria.”

Marcel heaved a sigh. “I guess so. Let me walk you back to your room, Sovlin.”

I raised surrendering paws, stammering, “N-no, you don’t—”

“I insist. I need to be sure I didn’t kickstart a full-blown mental crisis.”

The human maneuvered onto his legs, and stretched out his body with bloodcurdling pops. His strong hands tugged at my shoulder. The extended contact made me nauseous to my stomach, and my heavy limbs were sluggish to obey. I reminded myself not to think of him as my victim. Marcel didn’t want to be regarded in that fashion, so I shouldn’t do him that disservice in my perception.

The red-haired Terran wrapped an arm around my neck, which felt as heavy as a rock. How did every interaction with Marcel increase my guilt to chest-bursting levels? He led me out of Slanek’s quarters, and asked in a low rumble where I was heading. All I could do was point a few doors down, still a teary-eyed, snot-stained mess.

I noticed the predator drawing deep breaths, to quell his own anxiety. My self-centered concerns turned to him, and I withdrew from his grasp. Marcel blinked his eyes shut, his scars scrunching up with his grimace. I wanted to comfort him, even though I knew it was my presence ratcheting up his anxiety.

“D-do…you want a hug?” My voice was hardly more than a whisper, and I watched his eyes pop open with surprise. “No, I g-get that, of course you don’t want one from me—”

Marcel threw his arms around me, burying his face in my fur. The Terran finally let the tears spill over, which soaked my shoulder. I mirrored the way I’d seen Tyler comfort Onso, and pressed my paw onto his back. This was the first time I’d ever been this close to a human; not even my “friends” had embraced me. It was shocking how warm this predator was, like a heated blanket.

No wonder Slanek always curls up next to him. This is oddly disarming.

My heart ached, as the human continued to bawl his eyes out. I moved my claws into his hair, and ruffled the strands in the silly way I’d do with my daughter. It wasn’t clear how Terran years translated, but Marcel was probably about her age. He jerked his

head back, and fear flashed in his eyes briefly. The poor guy mistook my playful gesture for an attack.

“Sorry, shouldn’t have used the claws. It must feel like I was slicing at you; I wasn’t thinking,” I mumbled.

Marcel patted his mane back down. “It’s just…never mind. This here is where you’re heading, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool beans. Hey, listen…I wish you only the best. I don’t want you to be depressed on my account.”

It’s not on his account. It’s because of me and knowing what I am.

“T-the last thing I want is you worrying about me.” I wasn’t going to spill my emotional turmoil on this human, who could keep his own trauma contained. “I wish you hated me.”

“Well, I don’t. *You* hate you, Sovlin.”

“…yeah.”

“I don’t have to be a therapist to tell you where it all stems from. You blame yourself for what happened to your family. If you want to do something for me, get help.”

“Tyler told me about someone. I didn’t think—”

“That you deserved help. It’s okay to be happy and live your life. You’re not going to pay off some self-imposed debt to me by being miserable.”

I averted my gaze. “T-thank you. Whatever anyone says about you…you’re the strongest person I’ve ever known. How much you care for others is astounding, and it speaks wonders of your species.”

“Nobody’s perfect. I just hope when it’s all said and done, I leave the universe a better place,” Marcel said. “It’s not too late for the sum of your actions, you know.”

“I promise I’ll try. From now on, I’ll try to be like you.”

“I’m not the worst role model…in my humble opinion. If only I could smack the same lesson into Slanek’s skull. But it seems like we’ve settled our issues, and that’s that.”

“That’s that.”

“Good. Well, I think I’d best be going. Rest up!”

As the predator turned away, I wondered how I ever could’ve believed his species was incapable of empathy. The truth was, Terrans had to be one of the most empathetic species to cobble together anything bordering normalcy. It took a great deal of emotion to repress their hunting instincts with such thoroughness. Perhaps that was why they’d bonded with the Venlil; they both were sensitive species with ample feelings.

As Carlos told me, the issue was when empathy wasn’t extended to a particular individual. Marcel chose to grant it even to me, after what I’d done; that was the sign of a good human. I couldn’t believe how openly he was conversing with me, and how he had wiped the slate clean. The catch was that I could not - would not - forgive myself.

I laid down on the floor of my room, and thought about the legacy I would leave behind. Marcel did have a point though. The torture would always be in my ledger, but I could surround it with other deeds. Suffering was my idea of a fair punishment, not any request of the scarred primate. It wasn’t going to make things right between us; if anything, it seemed like it would worsen his recovery.

Maybe it was time to get my head straight, as the humans so often suggested. I could become a better version of my despicable self, with the predators’ guidance.

Chapter 104

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: December 7, 2136

The war activities occupied the vast majority of my schedule, which was packed with diplomatic meetings. Even this stand-offish version of the United Nations sought as many allies as possible; humanity was determined to spin the narrative in their favor. There was a battle being fought on every communique, and every broadcast sent out over the airwaves. The liberation of millions of cattle, ironically from the sector that included the Krakotl, was a great victory.

Springing an Arxur Chief Hunter from a Sol-based prison hadn't been my plan for the past week. The recollection of sharing a shuttle with Isif sent shivers down my spine. But in the moment, confronting him had been natural and easy. The knowledge that he possessed empathy for prey species further disproved what the Federation said about predators being unable to feel. It also meant the gray had done horrible deeds, *with a conscience.*

Somehow, that was the easiest discussion that I'd had all week, politically. The Sulean-Iftali alliance, self-declared speakers for converted "neutral" voters, had scheduled call-after-call with Federation species. None of these dialogues had gone anywhere, besides noncommittal agreements to reconsider their allegiance. Noah mentioned the bright idea of winning some species over with returned cattle.

Humanity had remarkable persuasion abilities, but I was losing hope. My only bet for a potential convert was the Thafki, a race which as of two days ago, had 12,000 members alive out of captivity. The sudden return of millions of cattle, swiped from under the Arxur's nose in the battle sector, would bring them back to the bargaining table. Secretary-General Zhao mentioned helping them re-establish their society, and gifting them an independent settlement under UN protection. The idea was ingenious.

The Terran stampede and the sabotage caused us to lose two of our original allies. With the Thafki's numbers, one individual getting blown up on a shuttle was important. As for the Sivkits…Ambassador Axsely

left and never returned.

Noah waited at the hospital entrance, his helmet tucked under his shoulder. There hadn't been much availability in my docket, to spend one-on-one time with the cattle rescues. The sight of the broad-shouldered human brought energy to my weary brain; unmistakable feel-good chemicals entered my bloodstream. When I was around the Terran ambassador, it was like all my troubles melted away.

"Noah!" I exclaimed, throwing my arms around him. A gravelly laugh gripped his chest, and he returned the gesture. "It feels like it's been months."

The predator smiled. "You saw me yesterday at the meeting with the Duerten."

"You kicked me under the table the entire time."

"Heh, sorry. Politics bore me, Tarva. I'm an astronaut, who loves studying the stars and the evolution of life."

"And me."

"And you, of course."

The human placed one of his muscular arms across my shoulder, and I circled my prosthetic tail around his leg. It was hysterical to me that his ship's arrival once had me ready to surrender my planet. Knowing Noah, those initial words would've horrified him and caused him to leave. Sara, meanwhile, would be the calming presence; her scientific curiosity would've prevailed long enough to ask us why we feared them.

I can't imagine first contact with a different ending. I won't let myself consider what would've happened if the astronauts disappeared and Earth…

The predators had become an integral part of my life. The galaxy would've never been privy to the Kolshians' deceit in my lifetime, without humanity's unwavering push for acceptance. I thought that I could never find someone who made me happy, after my marriage failed following my daughter's death.

Noah's emotions were indistinguishable from my own, at times; I cared about and experienced his feelings. The Terran occupied my thoughts at every waking moment. He said the sweet nothings that

made my heart flutter, and did all the chivalrous things from his own culture. Our dynamic was proof that humans could feel love and *be* loved.

"How is Glim? You told me when you were riding back from Celgel Falls that he was warming up to you," I said.

Noah's face fell, and he steered us into a break room. Glim was the only Venlil rescue on this side of the hospital, where the humans wandered without concealment. I had no idea how we were going to share the news with the other cattle. The Gaians would have more lapses in their covers soon, if we didn't divulge the truth. No offense to our friends, but they floundered at *not* acting predatory.

My beloved human had suggested that Glim could determine our delivery method, but I wasn't sure the former exterminator was up to the task. He had screamed at Noah's appearance, mere days ago at the train station.

"Haysi happened. Glim got her to open up, since she was unresponsive to us," the Terran ambassador said. "Sara and I watched on a security feed, and Haysi seems to have…studied us. Our exterminator pal's been detached and unforthcoming since. I could address Glim's concerns, but I want him to ask me himself."

I blinked in confusion. "What exactly did Haysi say?"

"That she ran some exhibit on humans called 'Pure Evil.' Tarva, we did all the things she mentioned. Abuse, cruelty, slavery, murder, and a thousand other things. Perhaps even you would recoil at Haysi's compilation there."

"…ah, *that* exhibit. I know the one, Noah, but I decided I didn't need to ask about it. Humans came here trying to be better, and I commend that. The rest of the galaxy has our dark secrets too, which we don't have the honesty to be open about."

"I thank you for that understanding. But to Haysi, she has irrefutable proof that the human race is rotten. The Federation only recorded us at our worst; that's well-established. How do we fight that? How do we win?"

"Show her the best side of you. As long as it takes, no matter how she treats you. It's exactly what you've done with all of us. Despite everything that you've lost, you didn't lose yourselves. I feared that you would."

“What about Glim? I showed him everything already.”

“Now Glim needs to see the worst of you. He needs to reconcile those lows with what he was starting to believe. He must accept humanity at its ugliest, to love you at your best.”

“Fuck…it’s exhausting to be blamed for everything any of us has ever done wrong. To know that I am one wrong word away from all of my efforts unraveling.”

I peered into his brown eyes. “Not with me. Now as for the Duerten, I might have my speechwriter draft you something. Maybe portray humanity as shepherds of the cattle…hm, at least they agreed to a second talk. You’re the face of Earth, so—”

“Tarva. I don’t want to talk about politics, or Glim. I want to talk about *us*.”

My heart skipped a beat, as the predator squeezed my paw. His eyes had taken on a pleading quality, and I could see the lines on his forehead. When Noah was focused on me, the rest of the world faded into the background. Who knew that a human could be so hypnotic?

The Terran cleared his throat. “I know we’ve gone out a few times. Hell, I even cooked you dinner at my pad, and you pretended the canned asparagus tasted decent. Those are good memories, but I want something more.”

“N-noah, I’m busy. I’m sorry that I talk about work so often, and that I’m not more available.”

“You’re the leader of an entire planet. I understand that…but I want to be official. I want to take you to Earth, and use the UN’s bottomless diplomatic funds on a fancy dinner, for us. I want to whisk you around the city in a posh car, and share my culture with you in style. The two of us, as an item.”

“Official? People would laugh at us…”

“I don’t care what anyone thinks. Let them laugh! I had to travel across the galaxy to find someone who understood me, who was driven and compassionate. I want to spend my life with someone who completes me.”

“There’s so much going on, Noah. The war, everything at home, the galaxy upended…”

“That’s why I don’t want to waste a second. I want to show you where I trained to be an astronaut, and the park where I found constellations with my dad. I want to put a hammock on the beach, and watch a sunset together. Mostly, I just want to be with you.”

Noah’s hand drifted to my shoulder, and the other cupped my head. I didn’t understand why humans loved face-biting, but those predator instincts were old news to me. There was no fear from him moving closer, even as his warm breath set my heart on fire. For all the death that humanity’s arrival heralded, it was their bonding ability that defined their species to me. Love and emotion helped them triumph against adversity, as the entire galaxy opposed…

A mortified scream traveled from the doorway. “H-HELP! Noah is eating Tarva’s face! He’s b-biting her!”

The predator leapt backward, and raised his hands in confusion. Glim was parked at the doorway, having watched enough of our private moment. The Venlil’s ears were pinned in horror, and tears swelled in his eyes. His legs skittered on the tile, as he backed away.

Glim thinks he just saw proof that humans want to eat us. Clearly missed the context. Great.

“Noah and I are together. Humans bite on the mouth to show affection,” I said flatly.

“W-what?! You’re…d-dating him?” A series of emotions flashed across the exterminator’s face. He seemed more mortified than before. “But he looks like a shaven runt!”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Venlil flattery is as strong as ever. You know how to make a man feel special.”

“T-tarva, h-human…h-human males hit the females of t-their species. You c-can’t trust his ‘love.’ It’s all in Haysi’s archive…”

Glim slumped his shoulders, and his ragged body quivered from head to toe. Noah narrowed his eyes, before moving toward the exterminator. A pitiful squeak came from the Venlil rescue, and his crying escalated to a downpour. Haysi’s shared atrocities had left Glim terrified of the Terran ambassador; it felt like regression, right after improvement was attained.

Despite how frustrating it should be for him, my Noah was as patient as ever. He stopped in his tracks, and gestured for me to join

him. I knew this human wouldn't physically harm me; it was absurd to imagine that Noah Williams would even *think* of hitting anyone. His long-suffering demeanor and concern for others were enough, but he also cared about me deeply.

Noah would take a predator's bite for me if he had to. He's never done anything but place me on a pedestal.

"Glim, you hear about one human doing something and apply it to all of us." The "Gaian" ambassador pursed his lips, and flared his nostrils. "Abuse is not societally accepted; it's illegal and considered disgusting to normal Terrans. Even if it weren't, I'd rather have my nails peeled off than have anything happen to Tarva."

I perked my ears up. "Noah and I went to a boardwalk here, and it started raining. He gave me his jacket to put over my head, so I could stay warm and dry. I told him not to do it, but he made sure *he* got soaked—not me."

"T-they're just pretending to b-be nice to manipulate you. Haysi t-told me…about humans t-trading each other like property."

Something changed in Noah's expression. "My ancestors were the ones treated like goods, and shipped across the globe inhumanely, with no regard for basic dignity. Worked, beaten, and raped to the breaking point for centuries. Don't you dare bring my name into that."

"What?" I tilted my head at him in concern. "I didn't know any of this."

"Of course not, because look where I am today, Tarva. I am proof that we're not the species from Haysi's capsule. Things can change. Humanity has changed, and admitted the barbaric mistakes of our past."

"H-how can you just accept that…was done to you?" the rescue stammered.

"Oh, you shouldn't accept injustice, Glim. You should feel sick and angry at everything in Haysi's exhibit; I do too."

"But w-why? Why would humans treat *your own people* like p-possessions?"

"It wasn't dissimilar to the Federation's spiel. Wrapped in a veneer of 'science' and morality, to infer lesser attributes on people who

looked like me. Rationalized bigotry isn't an Earth-exclusive ideology."

Glim recoiled. "What are you t-talking about?!"

"The omnivores deserved to be 'saved' and 'cured', right? Predators' lives are worth nothing? I'm not engaging in whataboutism; it's horrible, and that's unequivocal. I'm just saying we're all guilty of this savagery."

The Venlil exterminator's shaking had ceased, and a tinge of relief dotted his gaze. I wondered to myself if Glim thought he'd face punitive actions for touching these subjects. Noah's points had struck a chord even with myself; humans weren't the only ones who could be blind to their own hatred. Evil was rooted in a web of complex lies that transcended the individual.

"I don't want to be manipulated!" the Venlil wailed. "I don't want you to be pretending…using me."

A frown stretched across Noah's face. "I just want to help you, Glim. I wish it wasn't so hard for you believe that."

"W-we're scoring you points in the war."

I swished my tail. "The humans wished to end the Arxur's cattle farming, long before they were at war with the Federation. Their generals had plans to free you, which were sidetracked by constant plots against Earth."

"Exactly. Haysi thinks we're vicious pretenders, and she won't let us tell her otherwise. But even if you don't trust me, you know there's more to us than…pure evil."

The rescue fell into stony silence. "You knew."

"Of course we did. We were worried about Haysi, and we couldn't risk her hurting herself."

"Noah hoped you would trust him enough to ask him. You did well," I jumped in.

"I want to feel safe," Glim croaked. "I…I can't convince the other cattle when I haven't convinced myself."

"It took all of us a long time to trust them. You've had a few days, from knowing only that predators are evil. I can tell you Noah has the deepest sympathy for you."

The predator chuckled. “And Noah can vocalize his own emotions. I’m here to support and comfort you, Glim. You can talk to me about anything, and I want you to know that. I will never lie to you, so listen now. *You are safe.*”

“…even if I d-don’t help the other cattle?“

“If you want to help us, that is your decision. You are in control of you—stop calling yourself cattle. You are a person with autonomy to us, and no human is planning to subjugate you. Not now, not later, not ever.”

“Okay. N-not cattle. Gaians…c-caretaker.”

Glim was desperate for Noah not to be proven a monster; I could see it in his eyes, plain as day. The human advanced once more, and the rescue allowed himself to be embraced. Haysi was another issue, but one rescue was willing to see through the ugliness. It mirrored my own realization, on that first interaction, that the Terrans had a beautiful side to them.

If the predators could work past their worst moments with a former exterminator, there was hope to get through to other rescues. To me, this was a positive omen for the program’s future success. It would be an enormous boost for Earth’s diplomatic standing to get these liberated souls on our side.

Chapter 105

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: December 9, 2136

Negotiations with the Duerten Homogeneity were ongoing, though the last three days all ended the same. The moment Ambassador Noah brought up lending their auxiliary support ships to humanity, the galaxy's other sapient avians balked. The Duerten were recognizable for their curved bills, which stuck out like "Pinocchio's nose" according to my beloved human. They didn't take kindly to the UN's suggestion that those bills likely evolved to spear prey.

The Duerten also told me that a Venlil presence on the call was unnecessary, and shut me out of today's meeting. I would've rather been with Noah at the governor's mansion now, but I trusted him to take care of himself. I simply knew that if the talks fell through, the Terran ambassador would lump all of the blame on his shoulders. The United Nations *needed* to turn one of the military alliance-only voters; that constituency contained most of the Federation's powerhouses.

Earth can't fully commit to offensive action until we have the resources to support such maneuvers. Zhao would never run the risk of his homeworld being counterattacked.

Visiting the rescues' hospital offered a way to pass a few hours. It distracted me from my inability to get the endangered Thafki to send a representative, or to get the Duerten to do anything but chitchat. Were all these diplomatic efforts wasting the Terrans' time? There were only so many times humanity would extend a hand in friendship, and have it slapped away. At this point, it was for practical reasons that they tried at all.

Glim had stabilized, and was busy drafting talking points for Noah. The human ambassador had another unenviable task on his plate; we planned to reveal the Gaians' true identity to all of the saved Venlil tonight. There would be mass panic, once it was apparent that the masked bipeds were predators. This was the trial run for our larger ambitions with the other races rescued from Shaza's sector.

I'd taken it upon myself to monitor Haysi, who'd remained an emotional wreck despite the Gaians leaving her alone. My concern for Sara also lingered; the female human had been absent from the facility, ever since Glim snapped at her to leave. But now, I spotted the curly-haired scientist taking aggressive strides down the hall, and carrying a massive stack of papers. Her binocular eyes were frantic.

"Slow down! Take a breath." I rushed out of the security room, and grabbed Sara's forearm. "You're back here? What are you doing?"

The Terran waved her postcard-sized papers. "I went to the Venlil Museum of History. Photographed every nook and cranny, and annotated the human exhibit with sticky notes. Thought it might cheer Haysi up to see her old passion."

"That was very thoughtful of you, but Sara…I know how much you love to work with others. Haysi isn't one of your projects, okay? You're not responsible for her recovery."

"I just want to help. I know she would be too scared to visit, with human visitors."

"What about you? You're scared to visit *her*, because you know that she'll look at you like you're a monster."

"Tarva, you won't talk me out of bringing this to her. I'll drop it off and leave, but I must be sure it gets to her! After terrifying a Venlil who's been traumatized half to death, the least I can do is give her something that makes her happy."

"The whole terror aspect is not your fault."

"Yet it feels like it is. I'm giving this to Haysi."

"Then I'll go with you, Sara. Please just keep back, and let me do the talking. I'm not trying to silence you, but she won't hear a word you say."

The predator took a shaky breath, and nodded in agreement. I pried away a chunk of her photos, lightening the load she carried. It was a sincere gesture on Sara's part, to recall Haysi's request to visit the museum. However, with what we knew now, it was for the best that the Gaians hadn't allowed the rescues to roam free.

Haysi wasn't thrilled about the Terran "invasion" of Venlil Prime; little had shaken her dispirited state of mind. Perhaps seeing

exhibits that existed before her captivity would offer comfort. It was a slice of something familiar, which had once fascinated her. I remembered her eagerness to seek grants from me, when I'd been our planetary ambassador.

"Haysi might learn to love our exhibits in time. Maybe she'll appreciate humanity's nuance and complexity," Sara assured herself.

My ear flick was noncommittal. "We'll see. Let's go, together."

I thought it would be best to discard the photos of the human corridor, since it may evoke a negative reaction. Haysi seemed like the type to see her museum as defiled, or to see an objective look at the Terrans as a biased undoing of her "Pure Evil" work. There was no polite way to tell a friend not to showcase her species, though.

My advice was to demonstrate humanity's good side to Haysi; it's possible Noah passed my message along. I should've been more careful with my words.

Sara fitted her mask over her face, and extended her wrist in my direction. Catching on, I wrapped my prosthetic tail around her arm. Neither Terran astronaut complained that the metal replacement didn't offer the soft, bushy comfort of my natural appendage. It was the sentiment that counted to the predators. I was grateful that they didn't treat me differently for my disfigurement.

My paw wrapped around Haysi's door handle, and I pushed my way inside. Sara stood behind me, all but hiding behind my shorter figure. The predator's pulse had quickened beneath my metal tail, which its touch sensors picked up on. The Venlil rescue receded into her pillow, freezing at the Gaian's appearance. I think Haysi hoped Sara had departed for good.

"Hi Haysi," the Terran scientist said softly. "I'm sorry for bothering you now, and I'm sorry for my poorly thought-out exposure therapy. I'm not trying to scare you."

Haysi didn't reply, but I could see her teeth chattering in her jaw. My tail uncoiled from Sara's arm, and I gave her an encouraging ear flick. The human approached with cautious steps, clasping her photos with tentative fingers. I set the pictures I'd removed from the stack on the mattress, and the scientist placed the rest atop those

ones.

I gave Sara a pointed look, reminding her that I should handle conversation. “Haysi, Sara did something very nice for you. She knows you love the Museum of History, so she photographed the entire building for you. You can see everything that’s there now, just like it was in the old days.”

“I…d-don’t want anything from a h-human,” the Venlil coughed.

“Oh, come on. I *know* you want to see the Museum, and you don’t want to be around human visitors to do it. It’s up to you whether you want to look at the photos, but now, you can.”

“M-manipulation. Stop.”

“Nobody’s doing anything with ill intent toward you. We just want to help you. See, we’re leaving now.”

I reaffixed my tail to Sara’s delicate wrist, and backed out of the room with her in tow. Haysi pulled the covers over her face, waiting for the Gaian to recede from sight. My heart felt heavy, as we retreated into the hallway. The human slumped her shoulders, and I recognized that pouting posture from Noah.

It would be harsh to tell the predator my honest opinion, but I thought Haysi was a lost cause. There was no way of making progress with someone who refused to listen; the historian was entrenched in her opinions. As much as my next words would sting, I couldn’t go on seeing a friend subject herself to pain. There was nothing any human could do to win certain rescues over.

“Sara, I think that you should stop visiting Haysi. Nothing good is coming of you seeing her, and it’s obvious she hates humans,” I stated in a firm voice. “There’s no changing what’s been done. I can find another rescue to reassign you.”

“I don’t want another rescue!” Sara stomped her foot in frustration, pitch climbing frenetically. “I want my friend that I played Jenga with, and hugged before she went to sleep, back. I lied to her. I hurt her, and she can’t even look at me.”

“You don’t want another rescue? It doesn’t have to be a Venlil then. Listen, you could meet new and exciting species, the ones the Mazics are facilitating! A scientist like you could brainstorm strategies to rebuild the Thafki’s population, or perhaps be the bigger person that aids the Krakotl.”

“It’s ironic that we saved the species that led the extermination fleet, from the cattle farms. It’s sure funny.”

“You know there’ll be a shortage of Terran volunteers. Your help would be quite needed, and—”

Emergency raid sirens resounded through the hospital, a tone that every Venlil knew far too well. Sara seemed familiar with the warning, and her eyes stretched wide in alarm. Panic swelled in my heart, as I reached for my holopad. Dozens of messages from General Kam littered my feed; I should’ve been keeping an eye on my notifications.

Inbound signatures of an indiscernible make, heading for Venlil Prime. Our new defenses should thwart them with ease, but there’s the possibility of a few missiles slipping through, Kam wrote in his first message. *We don’t have the ship garrison we once had, despite humans standing at the helm. All civilians should be sent to bunkers.*

Sara leaned her masked head over my shoulders, and stared straight at the holopad. Humans were wonderful at focusing on what was in front of them; still, I couldn’t imagine having their narrow field of vision. Using binocular vision goggles, at the very Museum of History tour Sara had photographed, I had felt blind. The world had been a claustrophobic mess, and every person snuck up on me!

The scientist used a visual translator to parse the text’s meaning, and recoiled at once. The once-illegible Venlil script now imparted its grave warning. I hoped Sara could keep her wits, because I was losing my own.

“W-we’ve got to go,” I stammered. “T-there’s no telling how many ships are coming, and it’s p-probably the Arxur. D-did Isif betray us? Sara, let’s go!”

The human drew a shaky breath. “I’m not leaving without Haysi.”

“Every second we’re here, our r-risk of being caught in a stampede or b-bombed—”

Sara wasn’t listening to my response; her legs were dashing in the opposite direction of the exits. My ears could pick up other Gaians scrambling to retrieve their rescues. Even in my fear-stricken state, I recognized that bringing the former cattle to a bunker would be a problem. They’d see human refugees unmasked, and there wouldn’t be a chance for the planned reveal.

There were going to be panicked trauma victims, locked in an enclosed space with predators. This was a worst-case scenario; I hoped the Gaian volunteers offered explanations now, before the truth became evident. It was difficult to collect my thoughts, but I was cogent enough not to leave Sara to her own devices. I managed to chase after her, retracing the path to Haysi's room.

The human was collecting the photo stack off the bed; she stuffed the images underneath her arm haphazardly. Without hesitation, Sara reached for Haysi. That elicited an ear-piercing shriek from the Venlil, who thrashed around in panic. I had enough sense to fetch a mild sedative, and hand it to Sara. There was no chance the historian would cooperate with a predator carrying her.

The scientist jammed the needle into a vein, and scooped the forcibly-relaxed Haysi up. I wrapped my tail around Sara's leg, just in case I lost control. The last thing I needed was to get separated from her, and get swept up in a stampede. The human muttered reassurances, and jogged in the direction of the exit.

"Where is your car, Tarva?" the Terran barked.

I studied my reflection in her mask. "The d-driver should be waiting in the p-pick-up area, if he d-didn't panic. I'm s-sorry…I usually have c-control of my instincts, but Arxur raids are t-traumatic for me."

"I know that, Governor. You're doing great, okay? I've got you both."

The predator's warm stability coaxed me along into the outdoors. UN security personnel, who lurked in my vicinity ever since the memorial's stampede, greeted us. They had just been rushing into the building, determined to evacuate me after I kept them waiting. Sara allowed them to assist with carrying Haysi, and I let the humans herd me to my car.

The Terrans roughly pushed my head down, since the back door was already open. I dropped into a passenger seat, and tried to steady my breathing. Venlil Prime was under attack by an unknown assailant; we had to reach a bunker at once. I also needed to establish communications with my people, in order to make relevant decisions.

The UN security guards dove in, after shoving Sara and Haysi

inside. I huddled against the human scientist, and shot a concerned glance at the rescue. This was not going to be a pleasant experience, once we were all caged inside a bunker. That was assuming the three of us could get to safety unharmed.

“H-how close is the nearest bunker?” I asked the driver.

The Venlil flicked his ears. “F-five minutes, ma’am. I’ll do my best to avoid pedestrians.”

I cast my gaze out the window. Sara removed her mask, given that the security staff weren’t obscured for the occasion. It was selfless of the human to return for Haysi; I hoped that Noah and Glim were able to get to safety as well. The Terran ambassador could hunker down in the mansion’s bunker, at least. Glim’s fate was reliant on the other caretakers getting him out.

My frightened brain pondered the reason for our attack. Until we learned more about our assailants, and the confrontation had played out, there was no determining why Venlil Prime was under siege. If anyone could protect the civilian populace, it was our closest allies. Humanity wasn’t going to let our homeworld suffer easily.

All we could do, stuck on the ground amidst a major metropolis, was fast-track a route to shelter.

Chapter 106

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: December 9, 2136

It was obvious that the human was resisting the urge to comfort Haysi; even while the Venlil rescue was immobilized, her eyes screamed misery. Sara acted as my support pillar, giving me the courage to peer out the window. The Venlil capital had been plunged into chaos, with a free-for-all dash to the bunkers. Erratic driving was rampant, and the wrecks would soon cause a traffic jam that made road travel impossible.

Our Venlil driver cursed, spotting a multi-car pileup down the street. After thinking for a moment, he steered us up onto the sidewalk. The chauffeur yanked the steering whistle, and crept along slowly to give pedestrians time to move out of the way. We rolled down the sidewalk at a crawl; other vehicles began to act upon the same idea. I wished my driver hadn't decided I deserved special treatment for being the governor.

The crowd congregated in our path, and I noticed a few humans among those walking. The predators remained their normal selves amidst the chaos, evidenced by them shooting middle fingers at our car. One Terran even slammed the hood of my vehicle, though he stopped when he recognized me and Sara. Word traveled that Tarva and an *Odyssey* astronaut were the passengers, and the pedestrians parted.

We swerved back onto the road, past the massive wreck that would've delayed us. The tunnel up ahead was the site of the nearest bunker, so we had cleared the distance in a few minutes. I checked my holopad for updates, and hoped Kam would apprise me of the situation soon. Who was attacking us, and what were their goals?

"Oh, Tarva…this is apocalyptic!" Sara pointed to a handful of flaming vehicles, and stampede corpses near the bunker. "There's so many dead, for no reason at all. Where are your emergency services?"

I heaved a sigh. "Honestly, this looks like less stampede casualties

than usual. There will be no responses from EMS until the l-lockdown has passed. They're trying to get to the bunkers, same as everyone else."

"People are going to bleed out in the streets, not getting medical aid. Someone has to help!"

"It's little solace, b-but I think humans have helped, just by being here. You stopped Venlil from panicking. You kept your wits and directed your friends."

A horrified expression took over Sara's face, and her eyes were wide with disbelief. The UN security barked at us to disembark, since it would be quicker to clear the final meters on foot. My scientist friend scooped up Haysi, kneading her scruff to comfort her. That gesture had the opposite effect, but the predator kept trying. We hopped out into the smoky air, and I studied the burning wrecks of the cars.

One foot in front of the other—that was the mantra I told myself. The flames crackling around me reminded me of the human stampede, and that awful day that Elias Meier was taken away from us. Venlil were trapped within the car wrecks, and many languished on the ground with gruesome injuries. I could see in the Terrans' faces that they wished to help, but they prioritized getting me to safety.

Human instincts encourage them to help strangers in trouble. Can Haysi recognize their empathy's manifestation for what it is?

A screeching wail pierced the air, just enough that my ears picked it up; a few devices mirrored its sound close behind. Flashing lights appeared in my periphery, as the hum played up and down. The noises sped to quick bursts, followed by the deeper sound of a blaring horn. Massive trucks were coming from the direction of the hospital, emblazoned with the logo of the UN.

"W-what is that?" Haysi cried. "H-hunting signal?"

Sara's lips curved up. "Just look, sweetie. Please…look."

My own eyes widened with disbelief, as an entire armada of predators *rushed* to the scene. Humans in bulky, reflective pelts and hard helmets exited a red truck. They readied a massive hose, and began spraying gallons of water onto a burning car. I watched as they battled the blaze, tackling it with determination. More of their

guild arrived to extinguish other flames.

Boxy trucks were also in the area, with stretchers descending from their back hatches. Human paramedics never ran, but their steps were purposeful and well-intentioned. Somehow, they were collected amidst pure chaos; the external stressors rolled right off of them. The Terrans began tending to the critically wounded, providing life-saving measures.

Why were these humans not getting themselves to safety? How could they stay on duty with the threat of antimatter annihilation hanging over them? To think that they would risk their lives, for Venlil who had gotten wounded in our own panic…

Haysi gawked, as security encouraged us to keep moving. Perhaps it surprised her that humans were trained in medicine at all. These actions were selfless and altruistic, risking their own hides to save others. This was the epitome of why I fought for their species, and why I thought the Earthlings had good hearts. They were heroes in their best moments.

Sara sighed, as we joined a waiting queue by the bunker's massive elevator. "Any update, Tarva?"

The doors chimed open within a few seconds, and I kept my eyes on my holopad. My tail flicked in the negative; the human nodded, understanding. Terran paramedics shouted for us to hold the lift, before wheeling a patient into the car. Without further ado, we hurtled down to the bunker's underground hideout. I huddled next to Sara, trying not to think of how cramped it was.

The predator EMTs began setting up a makeshift hospital, and I reminded myself to commend their efforts if we survived. Haysi's eyes darted around the bunker; I could tell that her sedative had begun to wear off. The rescue wriggled her legs, earning Sara's attention. Had I been thinking clearer at the facility, it would've occurred to me to pack another dose.

The paramedics might have something to knock her out, if it came to that. Haysi wasn't the only rescued Venlil spiraling; a few individuals from the program had fainted or gone catatonic. Others were engaged in full-blown panic attacks, or cowering near-catatonic at masked humans' feet. Terran civilians comprised about 10% of the bunker's population, so there was no avoiding the sight of them.

“I’m going to put you down, Haysi. Just stay put, okay?” Sara still had the Museum of History photos under her arm. She shifted them into her hands with deft motions, and flipped through them. “You let the Farsul show you footage of us. Don’t you think it’s fair to let *us* show footage of us?”

Haysi whined feebly. “W-who t-told you? F-fucking Glim?!”

“Answer my question. Are you that opposed to seeing things which contradict what you already know? You’ve decided we’re evil.”

“Haysi, you thought it yourself, all the way back then. There’s more to humans than wars and violence,” I said.

Sara latched onto my contribution. “You heard us talk about all those good things: love, community, nature. You just saw evidence, with your own eyes, of our desire to help. Let me show you a little more proof. Let me show you how *we* present our history.”

The Venlil rescue trained her eyes on the paramedics, who were giving blood transfusions to an individual with critical wounds. Her gaze wandered, as if she were counting the number of Gaians in the room. Haysi noticed that some Terrans were scared; many were crying or showing signs of distress. Human children clung to their parents, and even a few Venlil were comforting the predator young.

One Earthborn kid tugged at his mother’s pelt. “Not again! I wanna go home. P-please.”

“M-manipulation?” Haysi asked, pointing at the child. “It d-doesn’t want to r-resist its hunger again? C-can’t be scared.”

Sara fiddled with her curls. “I’m scared shitless too. This brings back a lot of memories, of being caged in a bunker for days on Earth. As billions…died, and we didn’t know if we’d be next. It was traumatic, and that kid doesn’t know if this is any different.”

The human scientist tugged out two photographs, and passed one to Haysi. The rescue cringed, touching the same paper as Sara. I leaned over the predator’s shoulder, inspecting the image. It was a timeline of early civilizations on Earth, including ancient settlements and hunting methods. Ancient philosophers were depicted, along with temples and pyramids.

“How do you think that humans would define the start of civilization?” Sara asked.

Haysi choked on phlegm. “F-first hunting tools.”

“No. Read the part at the top of that exhibit, Haysi.”

“A h-healed femur…is the earliest…”

“Sign of civilization. Why? Because it takes months to recover from that injury, and requires help from others to survive. That is how humans define civilization: helping others.”

“W-when did w-wounded people stop being l-left to die, human? A few d-decades ago?”

“The first archaeological evidence of a healed femur is from 15,000 years ago. Someone had to care for that person…and nurse them back to health. We never stopped caring, Haysi, not even in our darkest moments. Whenever you look for compassionate heroes among humans, you will find them. That is my promise to you.”

Huddled in the bunker with thousands of others, I absorbed that lesson alongside Haysi. It was a nice benchmark to ascribe to civilization—a scientific way to quantify when a species started caring. The Venlil historian squinted at the photograph, before handing it back to Sara. Her ragged frame was quivering, while her voice was still fraught with terror.

Haysi cleared her throat. “W-what was the other p-photo?”

“It’s the exhibit of our accomplishments as a spacefaring species. It applies to the Venlil and every alien race. It’s proof that we reached out in open friendship, long before we knew there was anyone out there. You think we’re terrifying predators, but really, we’re sad, lonely primates screaming into the void.”

“P-please explain.”

“We sent manned missions to our moon, in the name of progress. We sent rovers to explore the planets within our system, and took images of every orbital body. We love knowledge, Haysi; we’ll run to the end of the universe for a drop of it. But none of that searching turned up anything.”

“B-but you didn’t g-give up. You s-say you invented FTL…on your own?”

“We did. I’m proud to have been on our first planetary survey mission. But, before that, we would scan the skies for signals from aliens. We sent a probe out of our solar system, with information

about our world and greetings–it was called *Voyager*."

The Venlil rescue inspected the blurb about the *Voyager* probe, and I squinted with equal fascination. Seeing humanity's innocent curiosity had wiped away my dread, despite the threat of an imminent attack. Images of their planet, music, sounds of nature, and mathematical schema were sent to the stars. Greetings were also recorded from 55 Earth tribes, wishing peace and good health.

The UN Secretary-General of those early days had inscribed words of peace and friendship, which I could envision Elias Meier himself stating. I could *hear* them spoken in Elias' voice, acknowledging that Earth was but a small corner of the universe. Putting forth humanity's desire to learn from alien cultures, and their willingness to share from their own library of knowledge as well.

"It wasn't going to reach any planetary system for forty thousand years, Haysi. Long after any of the humans involved in it could benefit from manipulation," Sara said. "The simplest explanation is that we wanted friends…and that we wished you well before we ever knew you."

Haysi threw the picture down. "How c-can you prove that you d-didn't invent this? Or c-compile it after making contact with the V-Venlil?"

"You can calculate where *Voyager* is today as well as we can. The weathering of time should be evident on it. Actually, the UN wanted to encourage Tarva to go pick it up. It was meant for aliens to hear, and there couldn't be a better recipient than our first friends. It would be…sentimental for us."

I chuckled. "I'll do it. Well, assuming we don't all die today."

"Tarva! My God, you can't go around saying that!"

"I am merely accepting the possibility. I'm hopeful it won't come to that. But if the end is near, I'm thankful to spend this time learning about the species I love. It would be an honor to give your *Voyager* greeting a proper look-over."

"It's beautiful," Haysi admitted. "T-there's no reason to t-tell so much about yourselves, and open yourself up to s-scrutiny. To d-danger."

A wistful sigh was all I could muster. "They reached out to the stars, and expected the galaxy to do the same. They couldn't help

themselves. It's simply who humanity is as a species."

My holopad buzzed, alerting me to an incoming message. I snapped my focus away from Sara, and ignored stares from across the bunker. The human and I were recognizable figures on Venlil Prime; it was our security who kept strangers from approaching. The people expected answers from me, and I hoped I had them soon.

Call me at your earliest convenience, General Kam had texted. *General Jones of the United Nations has pressing information.*

These details could be sensitive, but there was no privacy within the bunker's main area. Thankfully, my earbuds were available to keep the words secret. I dispatched video communications to Kam at once, fumbling with the keystrokes. The Venlil military official appeared on screen, a worried glint in his eyes. He added Jones to our call, and the high-ranking human studied me with her usual bravado.

The predator flashed her teeth. "Governor Tarva. Thank you for allowing me to phone in. I wish it was under more pleasant circumstances."

"W-what?" Heart-wrenching concern permeated my awareness, and my thoughts leapt to the gorgeous settlements of my homeworld. "Is V-Venlil Prime safe? Were our cities hit? How d-did the battle go, and who is attacking us, and why?!"

Kam raised a placating paw, a human-esque gesture he'd absorbed. "Venlil Prime has not been hit by any missiles at this time. There were a few hundred ships, seemingly hailing from Aafa. We've taken care of most of the Kolshian bastards, and we should be able to clean up the rest without issue."

"So we can s-stop them short of orbital?"

"Well short of orbital range, ma'am. Our advanced warning systems did their duty, and our defensive fleet outnumbered theirs by a substantial margin. Throw in humans being humans…the Kolshians got 'pancaked.' I'm hopeful we can give the all clear within the hour."

"We just can't rescind the emergency until the last enemy is dispatched. I understand, and it's a weight off my chest. Thank you, Kam."

“It’s not how well their attack went that concerns me,” General Jones interjected. “It’s *why* they went through with it in the first place. It wasn’t with the intent of succeeding.”

I tilted my head in confusion, unable to decipher the predator’s meaning. Perhaps Sara would grasp an attack meant to fail; I couldn’t see the objective, other than as spiteful revenge spurred by “fight instincts.” Then again, it was positive news that Venlil Prime was unlikely to suffer any damage today. The last thing I wanted was to tell my citizenry that the Federation harmed our home.

Also, how could it be herbivores, and not the Arxur, assaulting our space? It was difficult to process what Kam had stated, though I didn’t allow myself to dwell on it. I realized that the Venlil Republic was a treasonous enemy to the Kolshians; siding with humanity put us at odds with the Federation by default. It was simply unlike the tentacled manipulators to go on the offensive.

Prey only defend what is theirs; isn’t that their view on warfare? Why the sudden aggression?

I swished my prosthetic tail. “I’m not certain what point they’re trying to prove, General Jones. I am only happy that their ships lie in ruin, and that you have protected us again.”

“Allow me to share some intel that was passed along our novel FTL comms. Each of our allies is reporting a similar incursion in their home system: all failures, none with a convincing show of force. That leads me to believe that the Kolshians were testing our defenses. This was just recon.”

“W-what does that mean? P-please, tell me if I should worry.”

“It means shit is about to hit the fan. The Kolshians are assessing the weakest targets, and also gathering intel for the planning stage. The intelligence community on Earth analyzed the most-likely targets, and Venlil Prime isn’t high on the list. However, I don’t think preemptive buffs to your defenses could hurt.”

“Okay. W-we have the upgrades you gave us, and we’ll bring in more ships.”

“We’ll help you too, since you’re a priority to the UN. But humanity can’t protect everywhere at once. We need goals beyond defensive measures—a forward strategy if you will—and that means earning more allies. I sure hope the Duerten, or someone, comes around.”

“I’ll keep my ears peeled on that matter. T-thank you for the information, Generals. I’m going to c-calm down the people here, and try to fix the fallout with the cattle rescues. Many saw your faces for the first time.”

“That’s a good idea. We don’t need any domestic situations arising for you. The United Nations and its subsidiaries will be in touch. Please keep us apprised of any developments.”

General Kam dipped his head. “Take care, Governor. We’ll see you soon.”

The call fizzled out to a blank screen, and I pondered what I’d learned. My mouth moved to inform Sara, Haysi, and the bunker’s other occupants that we should vanquish this incursion. However, the words were passed along on autopilot. From the sound of what General Jones discussed, the Kolshians were bringing a massive force to our alliance’s weakest link.

The Federation was attempting to regain control forcibly, after humanity scored two crushing victories. I feared that another planet could become a casualty of this war, before the tide turned; there were no positives in dead civilians on any world. It was up to the predators to ascertain the Kolshians’ game plan, and to get ahead of their next move.

Chapter 107

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 12, 2136

A diplomatic resolution to the battle of Sillis didn't solve all of my problems. Regaining organization, as well as finding places to pool a fleet without infrastructure, mandated a bit of time. Bringing Prophet-Descendant Giznel into the loop was also a priority; the last thing I wanted was Betterment breathing down my neck. The leader was chagrined by my unorthodox approach to disposing of Shaza.

With hostilities terminated and internal orders dispensed, I found an opportunity to slip away. The nearest dead drop location was a human module on the border of Yotul space, inside what was once Shaza's sector. Nerves had gotten to me, since this was my first engagement with espionage. What was General Jones going to do with the information? Would humanity's actions reveal me as the source?

Against my better judgment, I'd booted up a call with Felra during my travels. The Dossur seemed intrigued by my days-long absence from the messaging service, which I excused as "opposition from the UN military to a business proposal." It was technically true. Our discourse had stretched into the late hours of the night, when she was forced to depart for a few winks. Rest wasn't a terrible idea, though my own sleep was broken.

Felra couldn't call during her shift as a mechanical inspector, though she texted the majority of the time. She was close to finishing her day's work, and was eager to hop on a call afterward. I warned her that I had important matters to attend soon; my ship had Jones' outpost in sight. However, as usual, the Dossur was unfazed by my excuses, and unrelenting in her demands.

You know I don't usually respond this slow, Siffy, Felra texted. *We have been swamped, with Sillis ships docking for repairs. I saw a real, live human at work today…many of them, by sneaking a peek at the* "*quarantined*" *lodgings. You guys are gigantic!*

I snorted to myself. The Dossur was never short with the unsolicited details about her day-to-day activities. If she thought that humans

were massive, an Arxur's size would astound her. Despite our slouching posture, we could loom over the primates if we so desired. It mystified me how the Federation species could compare us and the Terrans, and see predatory features in the tree-dwellers.

Well, I suppose you should be working, not on here chatting, I answered back. *Don't get into trouble on my account.*

The Dossur typed back furiously. *For crying out loud, Siffy! Show a little curiosity. Ask some questions…if you're interested in what I'm saying at all.*

Fine. Did seeing the humans scare you, Felra?

Yes…please don't be mad at me! I'm just being honest. I didn't tell you this, but I've watched a lot of human media since I paired with you here. Your comedies are hysterical and outlandish, for one.

You only watched comedies?

I watched the first human to appear on a Venlil talk show too. Some actor; he played off what the host was saying without hesitation, read discomfort with ease, and made fun of himself. So natural, conversational, and charismatic. So…unlike you.

My paw nearly dropped the holopad, and I considered switching it off. Of course, I was nothing like the charming primates, with their smooth sociability and their empathetic capacity. I would be lucky to call myself a shallow echo of their personal depth. Perhaps it would've been possible for me to be a better Arxur, but the deeds I'd committed had hollowed out my defective side.

Had Felra figured out that I wasn't a human at all? No, if she had ascertained that her internet friend was an Arxur, she would've cut contact. The Dossur was getting close to the truth, so I needed to deflect her attention.

I do not want to talk about me, I sent back.

You never want to talk about you! You won't tell me one thing that's real about you, or one thing that's not wrapped in mystery. It's like you think if you're genuine, you're going to scare me off. Just because I'm small doesn't mean I'm a damn coward!

I do not think that, Felra. But I would scare you off, it is a fact. You said the humans you saw at work scared you.

I kept looking though! What absolute goofballs…the way they razzed

each other was so juvenile. The more I looked, the more I thought you're overgrown children. But not you.

I am not like them.

Answer me an honest question. Do you have predator disease? Don't take that the wrong way. I've thought there are harmless strains of predator disease, which isn't exactly a popular idea here.

Define predator disease.

You know…antisocial, violent, noncompliant, nonconformist, lacking a full range of emotions, or delusional? Some combo of those.

Those are unrelated attributes. You can call me nonconformist and leave it at that.

Okay, Siffy. I'm not judging you, I just want to get to know you. I want to understand you.

You cannot do either of those things! Don't you get it? I am not a good person, Felra; I have thought about little but my own survival for decades. I'm not prepared to interact with people like you, or to censor myself as humans do.

I don't want you to censor yourself. I think you are deeply unhappy and troubled. You don't deserve to be alone…just open up to me, man. Ah shit, let me guess, now you'll say you have to go?

I do. Guess you know me after all. Good-bye.

The way Felra peeled back my emotional layers, and hounded me for personal insights, left my defective side in a full-blown mutiny. I'd gotten too close to confessing the actual things I'd buried; speaking with the pesky Dossur was always a mistake, yet I kept doing it. What good would babbling about my feelings do, other than to let misery overtake me? It wasn't like I could detail my life's work, and the reasons why I acted this way, to her.

The rote actions of piloting the ship distracted me from the message banners accumulating on my holopad. It buzzed with an incoming call, as I descended toward the minimalist human station. Growling to myself, I took the device and shoved it back in the drawer. If I had any courage befitting an Arxur, I would delete that silly rodent's contact info; no, I would remove the entire SwiftPair application.

Just take this stupid communique, and upload it to the blasted humans'

computer network. The Arxur's future is relying on you, while you spend time caring about random prey you just met!

I jerked upright, as I realized which thought had crossed my mind. Caring about Felra was an unacceptable indulgence; that was the exact reason why leaf-licking races made illogical decisions for the preservation of one individual. Oftentimes, caring about another managed to get people killed, or cause grave detriment to their own lives. It was foolish weakness, and there weren't even social benefits in my case.

Docking was completed just outside the dead drop site's sole entry. As I disembarked my ship, I was livid with myself. My claws swiped through the empty air, and my temper boiled inside of me. The fact was, even if I envied the humans' illogical morality and society, I was not one of their kind. This weakness needed to be purged at once, before it ruined me.

"Fucking Tarva, with her stupid ideas. Oh, I *really* need a friend," I ranted to myself.

The airlock hissed open at my arrival, granting me access to the one-room space station. I'd stormed through the docking tunnel in a haze, and I couldn't wait to return to my ship. The point of my operation was to end the cruelty and starvation of my people. Revealing Giznel's plot was a way to up the ante; it could stoke the flames of open rebellion. The data drive in my grasp felt heavy from its importance.

A green light flashed in a wall camera, likely activated by a motion sensor. I leaned closer to the computer display, tracing a claw across it. There were multiple ports, but I needed to find one tailored for my specific hardware. Perhaps General Jones or one of her henchmen had the sense to leave accessible instructions….wait, did humans even know Arxur script?

The lone computer monitor blinked to life, and I wondered if it was triggered by my presence as well. My pupils flitted up, seeing a feed of General Jones' face on screen. It was possible that this was a prerecorded message with instructions, which would be an efficient decision. However, the primate's eyes seemed to be following my movements.

"Is this live?" I queried.

The human dipped her head, dust-colored bowl cut waving slightly. “Yes, Isif, this is a real-time communications feed.”

“The point of a dead drop is to have no contact with you, yes?”

“You are correct. Don’t consider this standard practice for our discussions, but I needed to speak with you. The motion sensors tipped me off to your arrival; thank you for coming, by the way. Oh, and before you ask, this is a secure and private feed.”

“Noted. General, I had nothing to do with the captured humans on Sillis.”

“But you had everything to do with Chief Hunter Shaza arriving in multiple pieces. Dead, and not answering any questions. Zhao wants intel, not a pair of homemade Arxur-skin boots.”

I suppressed a laugh, somehow managing to keep a straight face. The liberated Terrans had done as expected, exacting their revenge upon the cruel Arxur. It was a fitting end for her, after the gruesome death she’d given to a sapient predator. I had been looking forward to executing her myself; outsourcing the work tempered the pleasure, though the outcome was still satisfactory.

“How could I have possibly known that humans would kill their own prisoner?” I asked, baring my teeth. “I sent her with Zhao’s people, just as you asked. This seems like the problem is on you.”

Jones narrowed her eyes. “Isif, you knew exactly what would happen.”

“Ah, if this is what you needed to speak with me about, perhaps I have nothing to share with you after all.”

“It’s not. I’m just warning you not to play games with me in the future. There’s bigger things at stake than your personal vendettas.”

“Consider it your payment to me for helping you, yes? Shaza called me elderly. She’s also a cannibal who intruded on *my* sector!”

“I am aware of her history, but her insights would have been valuable to the United Nations. If you want to overthrow the Dominion long-term, sacrifices must be made. With that said, I would love for you to brief me on what you came here to share.”

“Giznel told me that the Arxur unleashed the virus on our own cattle. Betterment purposefully imposes strategies that prevent the Dominion from recouping enough prey to feed us, whether through

raiding or breeding. Therefore, I doubt my government would have any interest in lab-grown meat or non-sapient cattle."

The human was quiet for a long moment, biting her lower lip. Intelligence gleamed in her binocular eyes, which studied me with interest. General Jones leaned forward to the camera, and offered an unnerving smile at last. There wasn't the slightest element of surprise in her expression, or any sort of reaction like I had expected. Did anything throw the military guru off her game?

"I surmised as much," Jones sighed. "There's no logical explanation for the Arxur's raiding policies, shooting yourselves in the foot."

"You deduced a centuries-long conspiracy from our military doctrine being…illogical?" *It's like she's trying to make me feel stupid for not seeing it sooner.* "That just proves we're destructive. Drawing far-reaching conclusions is illogical."

"Well also, the Kolshians specialize in gene editing, but they bomb predators, instead of 'saving' them. They don't need a cattle virus when they can, and do, use antimatter to ruin ecosystems."

"I see. I guess I have wasted my time bringing it to you."

"There's no need for pouting. Confirmation is always valuable information, and specifics are also key to proving it. It's nice to have actual intelligence in my back pocket, should I pass this up the food chain."

"You mean when you apprise Zhao of this development, and give him more reason to believe we are all animals."

"Your empathy test surprised him, Isif, and has caused him to reconsider your motives. Regardless, I'm not here to rehash this old feud, or even to lecture you on Shaza. There are concerning war developments as of late."

My nostrils flared with interest. "Go on, Jones. Another attack on Earth, and you want my help?"

"Bah, we wouldn't ask for your help in that circumstance unless we were truly desperate. The Kolshians are gunning for our allies, to the point that they assaulted every last one with a trial run. We've figured out their true target, and they already have thousands of ships ready to bury it. Or seize it; it's hard to say."

"I don't understand why you're telling me this. Venlil Prime isn't

under my protection, other than my pledge not to attack it. If my people knew I was on amicable terms with Tarva…"

"The main target isn't Venlil Prime. It's Mileau—the Dossur homeworld."

My heart plummeted into my chest, thinking about Felra's attempts to befriend me. She was a bold character, unabashed in her opinions and curious about predators. I had just admitted to myself that I cared about the rodent, and now, her homeworld was under attack. It didn't make sense why the Terran general would inform me about Mileau's pending attack, unless she expected me to help.

I knew Jones was spying on me, but this is a cheap trick, even for her!

"So the Federation wants to take back what they've lost." Indignation sparked in my chest, as I weighed this manipulation attempt. "And why would you think I care about the Dossur homeworld?"

The human shrugged. "It's a Federation objective in your sector. Bringing Arxur ships to their aid would prevent the Kolshians from branching out to the galaxy's fringes."

"You are the one playing games with *me*! They are your allies, not mine. Send human assets to save the Dossur, since you seem keenly aware of their plight."

"I wish we could. Mileau is two days travel from Earth. Our assets cannot reach it in time; the Kolshians had their ships en route and waiting. But you…you have forces there. You yourself are half a day from it, and could get there in time."

"You are fucking insane! What would the Dossur even think of my arrival?"

"I suspect one in particular is whose thoughts you care about. I am giving you information; what you choose to do with it is your prerogative. You would be equally upset with me if something happened to your friend and I didn't tell you."

"You admit—"

"Farewell, Isif. Stay in touch."

General Jones had the audacity to hang up on me, and I punched the computer screen out of frustration. The glass cracked against my hardy paw, sending sparks flying. My tail lashed with outrage; I

stalked out of the habitat in an emotional frenzy. My feet steered me back onto my ship with more urgency than I could admit.

I fished out the holopad, and determined that I had to warn Felra of the inbound attack. Perhaps she could get out of Mileau's system and survive, without military interference. The Dossur ignored my call attempts, and her avatar had gone offline. I checked the chat logs in a panic, reading her final messages.

Hey Siffy. The humans who docked here just received warning of an incoming attack…from the Kolshians. There's not many of you, and their ships are here for repairs. It's not good.

Evacuation ships were apparently considered, but the first few we sent out didn't get very far. The Kolshians have FTL disruptors, and they're not letting anyone slip away. The humans advised us to shelter in place in the docking station. I am scared.

Please talk to me, Siffy. Please…I am so scared. I'm sorry for prying earlier, I really need you now! Tell me it's going to be okay.

I don't have much time. They're going for our communications first. If I don't make it out of this, I want you to know I've enjoyed our chats. Every weird, reclusive moment.

I stared at the last message in mute horror, and an odd burning plagued my eyes. A strange sorrow clamped at my chest, one which I could not bury. It was a sad commentary that an internet "friend", an herbivore I'd known for a few weeks, marked the closest I'd ever felt to someone. Hadn't I just cautioned myself about the illogical, harmful actions that attachment caused?

My defective side clamored for me to act on General Jones' imperative. Perhaps I would've considered the idea even without the human's input, just hearing Felra plead for my presence. The Dossur was the first person to care about me, even though she'd hate me once she knew the truth. Leaving her to die, when I was the sole party who could help, wasn't an option.

With a shaking paw, I booted up my internal communications. The communique to send a full fleet to Mileau, and to treat the Dossur as protected friendlies, was dispatched before I could rethink it. My engines revved to life, and I set my warp course for Felra's system. Reason be damned, this foolish Chief Hunter was coming to his friend's aid in a hurry.

Chapter 108

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 13, 2136

My shuttle traversed the space that separated me from my alien pen pal. The eight thousand Dominion ships I'd summoned had arrived as well; those were the assets I had within immediate range of the Dossur homeworld. The Arxur fleet awaited my command, requiring further instruction as to our goal.

The reason why they hesitated was simple; the Federation had numerical strength that seemed fantastical. The Kolshians had sent forty thousand ships barreling into the system, or possibly more. It was greater than the initial size of Kalsim's extermination fleet! I understood what Prophet-Descendant Giznel had implied about the prey powers being able to muster up numbers, if they wanted to.

The invasion of Mileau's system involved an overwhelming show of force, per my initial readings. The more I performed the mental math, it was striking how easy these numbers would be for their assembly. With a mere 30 species having flipped to humanity's side, that left 270 races to pull resources and ships from. If all of those races contributed 140 ships, that gave the number we saw today.

It's a mere fraction of their available resources to pull from. This is the tip of the iceberg for the Kolshians' might.

The Dossur's defenses were steamrolled by the juggernaut armada, and the human ships seeking repairs didn't hold a candle to this astronomical force. General Jones was off her hunting pedestal if she thought I could stop this assault! Even our numbers were unlikely to achieve more, beyond delaying the Federation's end goals. But since I was already here, risking my cover, there had to be an attempt to rescue Felra.

"Felra is in an 'old Federation spot.' A space station, which has a separate area for humans awaiting repairs," I muttered to myself.

I was grateful that my shuttle had no company, so I could muse over how to locate her aloud. The Arxur ships around me grew restless, now that I was in the system. They expected orders from their Chief Hunter soon, and it was a matter of time before the UN

or the Federation noticed our arrival too. Was it my sentimentality that was telling me to interfere?

My viewport zoomed in on Mileau. The Dossur homeworld wasn't reflecting any antimatter damage; the Kolshians had the planet comfortably under control. After the Federation failed to subdue the Mazics, they'd ramped up their efforts. I could see the enemy sending shuttles down to Mileau's surface, and realized that their goals were likely re-education.

"All Arxur ships, listen up. We are here at the request of the United Nations, who have the means to feed all of us *forever*," I barked into the Dominion's encrypted feed. "Some of you were there on Earth, and you remember how well-fed you were. For that reason, I expect your hunting efforts to avoid Terran-affiliated races; we know it will be worth the pittance of restraint. Now engage with the Federation attackers, at once!"

Our ships surged forth out of various gravity wells, swarming the handful of attackers allocated to outer stations. I was bent over my holopad, and scrolling through a poorly-secured military personnel database. Inspectors were considered part of the space force on Mileau, as far as I remembered. That meant I could figure out which outpost Felra was assigned to.

Plasma munitions flashed across the void, and the element of surprise allowed us to pick off any stragglers. Dossur defenders, complemented by an array of UN ships, seemed to pause their desperate efforts. There weren't many "friendlies" left within the system, but the survivors seemed baffled by the Arxur's arrival. Perhaps they thought our onslaught was an inopportune coincidence.

"Attention, military personnel of the Dossur home system." I broadcasted my next message onto an open channel, and tried to eliminate any hostile words. "The Arxur are here, at the behest of the United Nations, to aid you in defending your claim against the Federation. I will only warn you once: do not fire upon us."

My pupils darted back to the screen, where I'd searched up Felra's file. The rodent's likeness was unmistakable in her documentation, and her present assignment was listed near the top. I searched up the space station number, pinning it down on a star chart. The rest of the battle faded away, as I raced to pull up that location on the

viewport.

The complex was nestled within an asteroid belt, which separated the inner and outer planets. A few dozen Federation attackers had tamed its meek defenses, and docked with the station to capture their inhabitants. The energy readings in the vicinity were fresh, suggesting that the Kolshians only put down spiteful (human) resistance in the past hour.

There might still be time to save the Dossur, if you hurry.

I hurled the maximum output into my thrusters, and my shuttle blazed a path for Felra's station. A few Arxur vessels tailed their commander, though I figured they were baffled by a Chief Hunter leading the charge. This entire mission was going to raise questions I couldn't answer. Right now, I didn't have the time to waste on tact.

The Federation vessels pulled away from the station, and met us for a head-on confrontation. I shirked the engagement altogether, leaving my underlings to duke it out with the prey. The sudden courage from the Kolshians surprised me; it was clear they were more competent than they let on. My eyes swelled with franticness, searching for an open docking port.

"There are none!" I hissed to myself. "NONE! I don't have time for a proper breaching action…I have to get down there. For fuck's sake, I'll make an opening."

Scanning the station's blueprints, I identified a maintenance tunnel, which should be well-clear of any living quarters. This shuttle carried two missiles, and I hoped the use of one would only demolish a wall. While station operators could seal off individual compartments, that also meant that I'd need a pressurized suit for oxygen. I tugged the emergency fabric on with haste, before donning a safety harness.

With my biological requirements taken care of, I fired a missile into the station's exterior wall. The tunnel was exposed to the vacuum of space, its structure blasted wide open. Bullets clipped my rear flank, as Federation hostiles noticed my approach. Curses spewed from my maw, and I wrenched the steering column toward the new gap.

The shuttle closed in on the Dossur space station, dodging enemy munitions. I held no interest in returning fire; that would increase

the amount of time it took to reach Felra. My ship's nose dove through the opening, and I twisted the vessel's body to skid along the floor. Friction resulted in both an awful screech and shuddering sensation, before the tail slammed against a half-intact wall.

My shoulder ached from the harness' restraint, but I unclipped it without waiting. My suited paws tucked a firearm into a holster, and I slunk out into the station. The night backdrop of space was visible through the gap, as well as distant exchanges of munitions. Suffocating Kolshians and other Federation aliens lie gasping for air, alongside two Terran soldiers.

I grabbed one human in each paw, and dragged them toward the section divider. The primates were lethargic and their expressions were locked in an empty display; there was nothing behind their eyes, with no oxygen coming to the brain. I opened the emergency compartment, throwing the weaker predators inside. Sealing the hatch behind me, I removed my oxygen helmet. The Terrans' skin had been turning blue, though they were rapidly regaining normal coloration now.

"Hi." I swished my tail as politely as I could, and allowed the humans a moment to breathe. "Chief Hunter Isif, at your service. Sorry about the…unforeseeable depressurization. What are your names?"

One primate began reaching for her service weapon, and I hissed in irritation. My gun was out of its holster in a second, pointed at her in warning. Her hand remained frozen in place for a long second, before she submitted to my threat. I bared my teeth, a formidable warning rather than amusement.

My tongue flitted between my teeth. "Ah, you guys look like fresh reinforcements. Let me guess—the United Nations sent you from Fahl, right across the border? You never saw direct action, since Shaza's…plan for a swift takeover of Sillis was a failure."

"Go to hell," the female coughed.

"So I was right, I take it. I'm here as an ally. Where are the Dossur civilians? I promise, I'm here to get them out, not to harm them."

"Everybody knows your idea of getting them out is a cattle farm." The other human sat up, pulling a broken glass instrument off his eyes. "What are you really up to? Claiming this system for yourself,

or making—"

"STUPID! I'm a spy for the United Nations, a piss-poor one. That is what I'm up to, you and your government's stupid ideas. I have been…personally motivated into offering assistance."

"A spy, huh? Of course, you're the one from Earth. They had every opportunity to take you to Area 51 or some clandestine facility…"

The female cursed in exasperation. "Are you kidding me, Olek? You just instantly believe the UN has Arxur spies, with zero proof."

"Do you honestly think I would craft such a story on my own? Saying such a thing aloud is going to get me killed. I have no time to persuade you, humans, so tell me where the Dossur are now!" I roared.

Olek tilted his head. "Good argument, props to you, man. They've been ordered to lock themselves in their quarters. Big sign, says, 'Personal Quarters.' Just keep going straight, can't miss it."

"Thank you. Was that so hard?!"

Grumbling to myself, I stomped off past the corridor's hatch. The Terran soldiers struggled to their feet, and I resigned myself to them following me like herdless Venlil. Arrogance aside, I could use backup if I encountered Federation resistance. The herbivores might lack skill in combat, but they could team up on me alone.

Humans are competent fighters, so it's not like they're dead weight. That said, this Olek guy seemed a little too willing to believe that I'm a spy…

Olek squinted, without the glass adornment by his eyes. I hoped the human hadn't lost his vision altogether; even if he could only see shapes, I was certain that he was more competent than the Kolshians. The female human, who I believed Olek had called Lisa in whispers, was staring at me with distrusting, bloodshot eyes. Perhaps the duo were following me to ensure that I wasn't rounding up any Dossur.

I scanned the perimeter for hostiles. "How has your military experience been going?"

"This was supposed to be a relaxing assignment, after watching the Harchen for weeks," Lisa complained. "We were shipped here just in case, and the second we kick our boots off, in they come. Now the Arxur are here, telling fantastical stories that sound like Olek

crafted them!"

Olek cleared his throat. "They hit all of our allies with a test invasion. I hope it's not like this everywhere…I've grown attached to some friends on Venlil Prime."

"My source says this is the primary target. Venlil Prime is fine," I replied.

"That's a relief. Say, Isif the *alleged* secret agent, what convinced you to come here? You should tell us, since we're a team."

"We're not a team."

"C'mon, you totally want to tell me!"

I've already told these two humans everything, just to get Felra's location. They might as well know the truth, if they're stalking me. They're going to notice that I know her.

"An internet chatting service. A…a Dossur is my best friend," I growled.

Lisa's eyebrows furrowed. "What?! I'd hardly believe you'd dare to make a story like that up."

"I would not. Because it's insane."

I scanned my visual translator over the text markings overhead, and it deciphered the Dossur language as directions with arrows. Just as Olek had promised, the crew quarters were located down the main corridor. The passage had been devoid of confrontation, but gunfire echoed from up ahead. That meant Federation soldiers had already reached the living areas.

The Kolshians must've sent forces down from two angles; one boarding party had been held in the maintenance tunnel that I detonated. The other likely attacked from the other side, charging straight from the hangar bay to the quarters. Splitting up human defenders was rather tactical, for a species that didn't know the meaning of offense. Allegedly…

"Which one is your supposed pal?" Lisa pointed to a piece of paper, which I assumed contained room assignments. "Also, I see a few dozen Kolshians and count three of us. *Maybe* we should rethink our strategy."

The prototype visual translator had no trouble with the roll call, which listed Felra as room 219. I committed the Dossur symbols for

that number to memory, knowing her life depended on it. My firearm wavered in my paws, and I dropped into a hunting crouch. The humans crept along as well, lining up enemies in their scopes.

My pupils scanned each door for the numbers, while I ensured that my steps were silent. I could see cerulean and violet Kolshians moving between rooms, and exiting with sedated Dossur. All I could hope was that Felra wasn't among those already captured; it would be next-to-impossible to spring her from the Federation re-education party. My gaze drifted several doors down the hall, one room past where the Kolshians were now.

I pointed with a claw. "That one!"

My whisper was almost inaudible, but the humans understood the message. These Terrans were rather cooperative; I wondered if it was since they could gang up on me, the second I made a move or was found to be deceitful. The primates often had a strange way of showing gratitude for saving their lives. I'd hauled their oxygen-deprived bodies from the tunnel, yet they were likely calculating ways to kill me.

I can respect it at least. Unless I try to backstab them, I doubt they'll try anything stupid. Fighting the Federation is enough for now.

Right now, the three of us needed to get past the Kolshian posse; the enemy soldiers stood between us and Felra's door. The thought crossed my mind to use the Terrans as a distraction, but I knew they'd see right through such suggestions. How were we going to reach my Dossur friend without alerting the invaders? A firefight seemed like the only solution, so I gestured for us to charge.

My claw depressed the trigger, and I nailed two Kolshians in the back before they could react. Olek and Lisa joined in on my fire, peppering any soldiers that couldn't find cover. The Federation got their bearings in a second, and hurled bullets back in our direction. We dropped down closer to the floor, crawling closer to Felra's door.

Most hostiles had ducked inside the room they were currently raiding, but a few had moved onto the next quarters: room 219. I scurried past the first door, feeling static electricity as a bullet whizzed over my spine. Lisa offered suppressing fire, as a visually-impaired Olek scrambled after me. The Federation had gotten to the target ahead of us, but I couldn't stop.

I fired desperate shots at the advancing soldiers. “No! NO! We’re too close to let anything happen.”

Panic clamped at my heart, seeing four Kolshians kicking down Felra’s door. I could hear a shrill scream, which lacked power or grit. Adrenaline flowed through my veins, alongside a deeper emotion of concern. I rounded the doorway in a fluid motion, and used my nostrils to pounce at a Federation lackey.

My body was acting on pure autopilot, as I tore one soldier’s throat on instinct. Felra’s screams intensified, which encouraged my frenzy. If I was lucid, I would’ve realized she was shrieking because of my presence. However, in my haze, all I could see was two Kolshians cornering her; another was tracking the rodent’s movements from further back.

My tail swept across the floor, earning a sickening crack as it broke two Kolshians’ ankles in one swoop. The enemy tracker turned his gun muzzle toward me, and I punched out a fist on instinct. My appendage connected with bones, while the scent of blood hit my nostrils. Vision sharpened, as the scent made my eyes dilate.

I’d just shattered the Kolshian’s windpipe and spine, with a single punch. The duo with the broken legs started to move, but Olek rushed in to stop them from engaging. It was tempting to finish the helpless Kolshians off; however, enough of my awareness had returned to realize it’d sicken Felra. I strained to bottle the adrenaline, drawing ragged gasps.

“H-help…human!” the Dossur managed to cry. “A…uh…arxur.”

Olek’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I thought you said she was your friend?”

“Hrrr.” I grunted, struggling to formulate coherent words. The blood was still rushing in my ears, causing my claws to twitch. “It’s complicated, is it not, Felra?”

“W-wha…h-how d-d-do…no.”

Additional horror lit up the Dossur’s gaze, as her terrified brain arrived at the truth. Something told me that she’d placed a name to the Arxur, who was towering over her with a maniacal snarl. I possessed a keen awareness of the blood slathered across my claws, and every scar and tooth fracture I had. The human watched from the sidelines, discerning enough of the subtext.

Felra swayed on her feet. “S-s-siffy?”

“Yeah.”

The Dossur’s eyes widened further than should be possible, and she passed out onto the floor.

Chapter 109

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 13, 2136

The fact that my appearance horrified Felra left me shaken; the primal rush of adrenaline quelled to something manageable. Bullets assailed the room's wall, as I was cornered alongside a Dossur and a near-blind human. The unconscious Kolshians, whose legs I had broken, were tied up to a desk as well. Olek flashed his teeth, laughing at the absurdity of our encounter. The urge to roar in his face struck me, but I kept that bottled.

With the gentlest touch I could manage, I scooped up Felra's tiny form. Her ginger-and-white fur felt puffy beneath my paws. Olek marched over to me, snatching the Dossur out from under my claws. The human opened up his knapsack, and stuffed the herbivore inside. As much as it stung to have my friend taken away, I knew the primate was best-equipped to carry her.

The Kolshian soldiers were camped in an adjacent room, back in the direction we needed to travel. The four mangled corpses and crippled bodies in this room were my handiwork; it was a shame that Felra had witnessed the full brutality. I'd known from the moment we spoke in the chat that she would hate the real me. Interacting with her had been foolish, especially allowing myself to get attached.

"So she's your friend, huh? But she didn't know you're an Arxur?" Olek shouted, over the gunfire.

My eyes formed menacing slits. "A human of all people should know what it's like to be judged by your species. Also, it's none of your fucking business."

"If she was your friend, you would've told her."

"I just wanted to talk to someone! FUCK YOU!"

The Terran soldier rolled his eyes, and scratched the brown fuzz on his chin. Olek's fur wrapped around his lip in what humans dubbed a "mustache"; it made his flushed cheeks stand out more. I imagined Betterment would've culled someone like him, with vision

defects that limited his daily function. What good was a hunter without depth perception? I didn't trust him to protect Felra.

You'll have to cover for Olek and Felra. And, assuming Lisa hasn't been gunned down, you have to protect her too. If one of the humans gets shot, the other won't leave them.

I moved a mirror across Felra's room, and used it to get a peek at our attackers. Lisa was scooting back across the hallway, in the process of reloading her weapon. There was no crimson blood on the human's clothes, which was a positive sign. She had been skeptical of my intentions, so I wasn't sure whether I trusted her to be on my side.

"Why did you believe my story so fast?" I hissed. "Your partner isn't so sure."

Olek shrugged. "It checks out. I knew they were up to something, or else, how did they get the Arxur to save Earth?"

"That was my doing. Let's get Lisa and retrace our steps."

"You're only saving one Dossur? There's others he—"

"The last time I saved some Zurulians from a cattle farm, they cried and screamed at me. Wouldn't believe for a second that I didn't want to eat them. I'm here for *my friend*."

"We have to—"

"The UN ordered me to help them. The best thing you can do for Earth is keep me alive. Move out!"

I didn't voice any of my concerns about Olek's blindness; he seemed to be physically adequate otherwise. As a defective Arxur myself, I wasn't a supporter of killing the weak and infirm. If I were born a human, I could live a normal life. Felra would've cried for my help, rather than passing out at my visage.

Shaking my maw, I took a final look in the mirror. My body was pressed against the floor, and I lined my gun barrel up with the Kolshians. A flurry of fire caused the enemy to hunker within their room; Olek and I scrambled against the adjacent wall. Lisa spotted us, and sprayed her own bullets from the opposite angle.

I steadied my breathing. Olek and I waited for the Federation to make the first move; they wanted to finish sweeping the corridor, before any Dossur could escape. Just by stalling them, we were

probably helping a few civilians get off the station. My patience was necessary in waiting for a target. A purple head poked out of the doorway, which resulted in a clean shot through its cranium.

As the Kolshian crumpled to the floor, her body blocked the opening for a second. I pushed Olek forward, crossing the threshold to a waiting Lisa. My legs sprinted right behind them, not slowing for a second. Engaging the enemy or delaying them for other Dossur was not my priority; we needed to get off this station.

“Where is the Dossur?” Lisa chased after me, as Olek hustled after us. “Don’t tell me we risked our asses for nothing.”

I struggled to speak between pants. “Felra is…in Olek’s pack. Now my shuttle…was still operational when I left.”

“Your shuttle? The one in the blown-up tunnel, which took a nasty tumble?”

“You ask many questions…and offer no solutions.”

“We almost suffocated back there! I don’t even remember how we got in that room!”

“And I…kept you alive.”

The two Peacekeepers were hot on my heels, not tiring as we hurried down the hallway. Even with my longer legs, the humans were beginning to outpace me. My breaths were labored, and I was grateful that we reached the sector divider. The Kolshians hadn’t attempted to pursue us, so it should be a clean getaway.

The Terrans followed me into the emergency compartment, and their gazes displayed apprehension. I recovered my oxygen helmet, slipping it back over my head. The primates had no such safety precautions, so if I were a more ruthless Arxur, I could kill them in the airless area. They were dependent on me for survival.

I don’t trust Olek and Lisa not to turn on me in the shuttle. My past experiences with humans haven’t been all pleasant.

The cruel, self-centered thoughts felt as heavy as a rock in my mind. Felra was safe in Olek’s bag, and I wasn’t going to let the Dossur wonder what I did to the Terrans. I wrapped my claws around the two humans’ shirt collars, ignoring their protests. Opening the airlock with my tail, I dragged them a few dozen paces to my shuttle. The primates would be crewing my shuttle, and that was

the end of it.

The four of us boarded the shuttle, and I tried not to fixate on what I would say to Felra when she awoke.

—

The battle for Mileau had not gone in our favor, just as I anticipated. There was shock value in an Arxur fleet coming to the Dossur's aid, but the Kolshians had brought the largest fleet in living memory. The typical strategies we employed, to make the skittish Federation flee, weren't having their usual effect. When the cowards didn't run off, their numerical advantage was insurmountable.

The United Nations' efforts were concentrated on escorting evacuation ships, rather than holding the system. The fortunate news was that the Federation were not bombing the planet; their ground occupation meant this wasn't a life-or-death contest. We could compile a greater number of ships, and return to take the planet back.

However, the Arxur's intervention need to draw to a close. Messages from Prophet-Descendant Giznel had flooded in, demanding to know why I defended Mileau. He demanded that I withdraw all forces from the system, or he would send someone to "dispose of me like Shaza." My execution was still on the table, especially if my rescue mission became known.

"All Arxur ships, Betterment has ordered us to pull back. These Dossur are not worth significant losses of this caliber." I looked at my data feed, surmising that our ship capacity had been halved. The Federation count had dropped by a few thousand, but our forces would be depleted sooner. "Cover any Terran allies retreating from the system. If you can get off parting shots at the Federation, do it."

A weak squeak filtered into my ears, and my head whipped around. Felra had been placed atop a wadded-up blanket; her tiny whiskers had been twitching in her slumber. Lisa was sitting next to her, wearing one of those asinine visors that humans caved to. A small part of me wished there was a mask that could hide my face. Even if I covered my optical receptors, the serrated teeth were a dealbreaker.

“H-human,” the Dossur croaked. “Where…am I?”

Lisa pursed her lips with sympathy. “You’re on an evacuation shuttle. How much do you remember?”

Felra’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she nibbled her lower lip. I could tell she was running through the details of the Federation attack, in chronological order. It was apparent when she hit the terrifying moment, when I had burst through the door to save her. Perhaps she didn’t remember that the ghastly Arxur had used her pen pal’s name…

“G-gray snapped K-Kolshian’s neck,” she squeaked. “Said it was…S-siffy.”

The Dossur’s pupils surveyed the room, alight with panic. I quickly swiveled around in my chair, as her gaze landed on me. I wanted to melt into the floorboards, and cease my existence then and there. For some reason, her terror felt like a knife wound to the chest. What I’d told her on the messaging service was correct: I deserved to be alone.

Lisa cleared her throat. “Isif can’t hurt you. You don’t have to look at him.”

Felra sniffled. “…Isif? N-not—”

“Siffy is a nickname given to me by a Gojid child,” I growled. “A refugee who was taken in by a human. Someone I cared about on Earth.”

Great. Now you admitted your affection toward Nulia too. You’re losing your grip.

Sitting here now, the stupidity of my actions slapped me in the snout. Mobilizing an entire war fleet to defend the Dossur, all because of a few internet chats with a false premise, was insanity. Felra hated me, and she had every reason to; her first impression of me was when I killed four Kolshians with natural weapons. The species she was actually intrigued by was sitting next to her, comforting her over me.

The Dossur buried her head in the blanket, nose twitching. Tiny tears leaked from her eyes, and her sides rose and fell in shaking intervals. The humans seemed to pity her, from what I could glean. Olek was peering over the top of his book; per the visual translator, the title read *Why the United Nations REALLY funded FTL research.* I

had a vague curiosity as to the contents of the pages, but this was not the time to ask.

I don't even think he's actually reading it, given that he can't see. He's just pretending not to stare at Felra.

Olek slammed his book shut. "Maybe pipe down over there, *Siffy*. You're only making it worse for her."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"In the future, you should disclose to people that you're an Arxur, before you expect them to respond well to you."

"I told her I was a predator; I never once claimed to be human! I allowed the idea to linger, perhaps because I wish I truly was one of you. I…I wanted to talk to someone."

Lisa studied the crying Dossur with concern. "What made you think it was a good idea to talk to a Fed, not a human? We understand you, somewhat."

"…Tarva, yes, *the Venlil governor*, thought I needed to understand herbivores. And also, you chatterbox tree-swingers hate us. You can't keep the disgust out of your voice, when it's between us and the leaf-lickers. You swoop in to protect them, just like you're doing now!"

"Because we know you're animals. My sister was in a bunker outside Barcelona, and you grays arrived to clear the tunnel. They watched you pull small animals from the grass, and eat them live. A few cats were swallowed whole!"

"Companion animals…sensitive topic, yes? Alas, they do not know what I understand about your cats and dogs. Cultural misunderstanding, which I will not make."

"I'm going to stop you right there; wolfing down a kitten is not a cultural misunderstanding," Olek chimed in. "A cultural misunderstanding is giving the thumbs up gesture, and not realizing it's a middle finger in some countries. The difference is, there's no death or animals getting eaten in my example."

Felra shrieked in irritation. "STOP! SHUT UP!"

A veil of silence was draped across the room. It would be comical for an outside observer to witness the tiny rodent, silencing three predators with a single order. I was relieved that the Dossur

regained her composure enough to make demands. My eyes studied her tiny form, as she lifted her tear-stained head.

"'T-to censor myself as humans do,'" Felra quoted. "The c-constant mention of scaring me off. He fucking told me…"

He? Gendered pronouns?

"I've watched v-vids about humans. I know how they act," the Dossur continued. "And I noticed that S-siffy was not like them. He *said* he wasn't like t-them, multiple times."

I blinked several times. "I am not like them. If you wish for someone to coddle you in a baby voice, you'll have to issue that request to them."

"D-don't tell them about that!"

"Sorry. Too late."

Olek and Lisa shared a look of pure confusion, mouthing a few words to each other. The male human mimicked an adoring expression, and stretched his binocular eyes wide. He mimed a petting motion, running his rough palm down his book cover. Lisa snickered, before waving a hand in front of her throat. The Dossur whined in annoyance. If Felra was a Terran, her cheeks would be flush with embarrassment.

"Damn it. W-why are you here, Siffy?" Felra focused her attention on me, and her whiskers twitched with fear. "W-what…are you going to do w-with me?"

My nostrils flared. "I do not know. I came to save you. I did not think past that, or about how to handle the consequences. I am not going to harm you, but…"

"B-but?"

"I cannot take you anywhere an Arxur would go. Just by coming here, I have ruined my cover. Betterment, that is our government's enforcement wing, will be suspicious of me at best. I might've just destroyed my chance at demolishing the Arxur Dominion from the inside."

"B-back up. D-demolish…Dominion?"

"They are cruel, and they are starving us purposefully…so that we are animals, as Lisa said. It goes so far beyond that though, Felra. The reason all Arxur seem devoid of emotions or care is because

Betterment culls anyone who exhibits empathy. It goes back to your question of whether I have predator disease."

"You d-definitely do."

"Actually, I am the lone Arxur tested by the United Nations to pass an empathy test. I guess I have 'prey disease.' I've always had softer emotions, and I didn't find social contact grating like most of my kind. Hiding those two…differences kept me alive."

"Most Arxur do tire of us talking to them," Lisa noted.

"Because they are not interested in your mundane lives. Even I find it bizarre how you wage war on silence, though your kind are quite intriguing to me. At any rate, I have no way to make friends among my own people, and I doubt I could pass as human on your internet."

Olek chuckled. "You definitely couldn't. Your speech comes off as stilted, and you don't seem to know the appropriate response to most things."

"I am a little short on practice. Formal speech is my sole outlet, yes? And the things I've done to survive justify calling me a monster, so in essence, I do deserve to be alone. However, it was nice to understand what friendship feels like for a brief moment. Thank you, Felra."

I turned my attention back to the cabin controls, satisfied that I'd said my piece to the Dossur. She had been an excellent friend, while our doomed relationship lasted. It was time for me to accept that my isolation was fated; this was why my defective side was dangerous. Everything I had worked to build was forfeit, including the friendship I'd forfeited it all for.

My mind zoned out, as I set a course for Proxima Centauri (a system the Terrans used as a staging ground). I wasn't foolish enough to fly to Earth again, no matter how sorry Zhao claimed to be. However, Felra and these two humans needed to be dropped off in UN territory. After that, it was time to face my likely execution with dignity and grace.

Even my smooth tongue would have a difficult time talking a way out of this with Giznel. He's livid.

A handful of pricks registered at the tip of my tail, and startled me half to death. My conscious mind barely reacted in time to prevent

a devastating lash; I froze up, trying to assess the situation. If those blasted primates were poking me with a sedative, I was going to rip their throats out this time. I wasn't keen on being in UN custody again.

The poking sensation moved up my spine, as if tiny hooks were ascending my sloped posture. I inhaled heavily through my nostrils, scenting warm blood belonging to a Dossur. What in the stars was Felra doing? It bewildered me that she'd left the comfort of her blanket, and the overprotective humans crowding it.

Felra perched herself atop my skull, right behind my eyes. "Okay! We're going to d-do this together, but you'll have to, er, t-tell me more about you."

"I'm sorry, what?" I hissed in disbelief.

"You s-said you didn't think past saving me. I don't want anything to happen to you, so we s-should think about it now, together."

"I am sorry about Mileau. You are under no obligation to speak with me, or continue in this vein of friendship. I am incapable of leaving this ship at the moment, but I would let you mourn in peace."

"T-The Kolshians are reeducating my people. I'm not captured now, b-because of you. You're Siffy, and I'm g-glad I know the truth."

"I can smell your fear, Felra. It is very potent."

"…I am s-scared of the humans too, for what it's worth."

I jabbed my tail toward the flimsy primates. "Hmph, them? They're lousy predators. They couldn't hunt with their bare hands if they wanted to! Olek can't even see."

"You broke my glasses, asshole!" the male human protested.

"The Arxur would still cull you for needing vision goggles. Not that I agree with that."

Lisa narrowed her eyes. "What about me? Would I be on the chopping block?"

"You ask too many questions, and you're repulsed by eating live animals. Most Arxur would space you, just for that."

The female Terran snorted, as her pupils fixated on the Dossur atop my head. Olek's expression had gained a bit more levity too, since

Felra made herself a physical accessory. Knowing how the human brain worked, the psychotic primates thought the sight was “cute.” Just having the rodent in my proximity probably made me adorable to them by extension.

That thought didn’t seem as repugnant to me as it once would. I couldn’t believe that Felra still cared about me; I had a friend that accepted my defective, physical form. Maybe one day, she’d be able to approach me without reeking of terror. Venlil had grown acclimated to the humans, after all.

With two humans warming up to me and a Dossur’s help, perhaps we could find a way to unseat Betterment. My sector hadn’t been lost yet.

Chapter 110

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: December 15, 2136

There were three new additions to our personnel, as we departed from Sillis. The UN fleet caught wind of an incursion on Venlil Prime, alongside every other allied race; the Venlil Republic's homeworld was as valuable to them as one of their own colonies. Humanity couldn't weaken the strength of Sol, but they allocated every resource they could spare. Their original allies were going to have every free ship with a gun strapped to it assigned to their fortifications.

It was expected to be a quiet assignment, ensuring that the Venlil system was impenetrable. The crew were allowed to take shore leave on the homeworld's surface, though we were expected to stay to be able to return to the vessel within an hour if needed. Many humans brimmed with excitement about seeing an alien planet, including Marcel and Tyler. Slanek, Onso, and the Tilfish had gone with them. The insectoids in question were Birla and Virnt, two of the new passengers on Monahan's warship.

Word of the Tilfish child's outburst had gotten back to Marcel, and he put in a word with the captain. The United Nations could take the "humma"-obsessed kid to Venlil Prime, where he could interact with Terran refugees in a controlled environment. General Birla hadn't been thrilled about the proposition, but her objections fell silent when the humans whispered something about a predator disease screening.

I suspect the United Nations may want to give Birla a proper diplomatic reception here. She was the sole Tilfish voter against annihilating Earth.

But the Tilfish additions to the crew weren't my concern. The third, and final new name on our register, was a human named Kiara Bahri. We picked her up from a Venlil border outpost. Earth had assigned a resident therapist to the ship, due to the stressors and adjustment issues our ship had faced. I recalled Marcel and Tyler's entreaties for me to seek help, so I hesitantly signed up for an appointment today.

This meant I was one of a select few to remain aboard the ship, while others explored Venlil Prime. Samantha also stayed here, to "grieve alone"; Carlos, meanwhile, had rushed off to a bar with some rowdy soldiers. I wasn't in any state to go rabble-rousing in the capital, so I sympathized with Sam, having lost her family. Regardless, it was unlikely I'd get an opportunity to see a professional about my issues, outside of downtime.

However, as I traveled to Kiara's office, my stomach was twisting into knots. It wasn't like I was unaware of how predator disease was treated. As much as I wanted to be cured of my mental derangement, the thought of subjecting myself to painful remedies frightened me. A severe case like mine would require the more severe fixes. People who were sent to correctional facilities didn't return the same either…

"Marcel wanted you to do this. It's important to get help, so that you never hurt anyone else," I encouraged myself. "Even if your gears don't quite spin as fast after, it's a small sacrifice to squash your impulses."

My claws rapped on Dr. Bahri's door, and what was left of my spines bristled. The fact was, this current state of existence brought me nothing but misery and self-loathing. It was cowardice not to face my predator side, so I shouldn't lack the gumption to get this "PTSD treatment" Tyler mentioned. If the blond-haired human claimed his species had an effective approach, I was inclined to believe him. Terrans were knowledgeable in medicine, contrary to Zarn's spiel.

"Come in!" a cheerful voice called out.

I forced myself to walk inside, taking in the room. A predator was dressed in civilian pelts, leaning back in a large armchair. Her sepia skin tone was a color that was also seen in Gojid fur, and her raven hair rested against her shoulders in complex braids. A warm smile graced her face, as though she was indifferent to the dangerous nature of her patients.

My gaze soaked in the rest of my surroundings, and confusion washed over me. All I saw was a small bookshelf and a desk, on the far wall. Kiara was gesturing to a human-sized couch, which was complete with pillows. I was stupefied that she seemed unarmed; there were no restraints tied to the couch, and no sedatives on the

table. All I could see was a clipboard in her hands, and a tissue box on the table.

Where are the brain scanners and the electroshock machines?

“Hello, Doctor.” This medical professional was separate from the ship physician; she was closest to what we called an Extraneous Behavior Identifier. It was amusing that even predators needed such an occupation, to keep their society civilized. “What…what do you need me to do?”

Kiara’s binocular eyes jerked over to me. “Sit on the couch, Sovlin. I’ve been expecting you.”

“Okay. I’m sitting, and I promise, I won’t resist whatever you need to do. I…I want to get better, and be a proper part of the herd.”

“What I need to do? You’re here to talk to me, about any topic that you feel comfortable with.”

“Yes, but after…”

“What is it you think I’ll do after? You’re the first alien patient I’ve had, and it seems that many of the non-terrestrial crew are scared of speaking to me. The stigma around mental health has been fading on Earth for the past century, so I can assure you, humans won’t view seeking help as a sign of weakness.”

“I know. My Terran friends encouraged me to come here.”

“That’s excellent to hear. I am here as a resource, a bridge between aliens and humanity in our joint venture. Please explain what the perceived issue is, Sovlin, so I can begin to address it in my outreach. I don’t want other non-terrestrials to see me as someone to avoid.”

I drew a shuddering breath. “We all know your work is necessary, but if you get diagnosed with late-stage predator disease…few people want to be incarcerated, shocked, or sterilized. The side effects of the meds, even for mild cases, are debilitating. Also, when the diagnosis gets out, you’ll be ostracized from society and employment. I know that, and I’m still here, because I can’t live like this.”

Dr. Bahri’s jaw slackened, an immediate failure to mask her surprise. Her eyes widened, as a mix of horror and outrage filled her pupils. The human took several seconds to collect her thoughts,

and I forced myself to hold her stare. Even a predator must wish she was armed around a self-diagnosed madman. Perhaps she was upset that I'd slipped under the radar for so long.

"I am floored. That treatment of mental health is somehow more atrocious than our methods in medieval times," Kiara said. "First off, I can guarantee that no human will electroshock or sterilize anyone here. The only case in which you would be 'incarcerated' is if you voice an immediate threat against yourself or others."

I chewed at my claws with anxiety. "I understand. If I have predator disease, I am a threat to the herd…and you'll remove me. As it should be."

"We do not remove the mentally ill from the herd. By a direct threat, I am referring to stating clear *intent* to harm someone. That is the only time authorities would be alerted. Otherwise, everything you say is confidential; if I spoke to anyone outside these walls about your sessions, I would lose my license. None of today's words will be shared."

"I don't understand. Why would you lose your license? Are humans insane enough not to warn people of deviants?"

"My goal is to help you understand yourself and find healthy ways to address your feelings. And just because someone doesn't experience the world in the same manner as us, it doesn't make them a threat. It doesn't mean they deserve to be cast out without a lifeline."

"But predator disease patients *attack people!*"

"A very small number of mentally ill individuals are violent, Sovlin. Mental health is more complicated than classing a condition as predator disease, or not predator disease."

"So what? We're just going to talk, and nothing else? And this is magically going to make my illness go away, right…"

"We'll talk. Any diagnoses made are for you to better understand how your brain works. I may recommend that you seek evaluation for medicine, if I feel it is in your best interest; however, this would only be to tackle specific neurochemical imbalances."

I snorted to myself, unable to believe the inefficacy of this therapy. To think that Kiara Bahri was a licensed medical professional, for performing the duties of a talk show host. What a waste of a higher

education! How would she determine that I had a “neurochemical imbalance”, without any testing technology?

I’m never going to get my predation cured. Tyler and Marcel think I can talk it out of my system…stupid predators. You’d think a violent species like humans would get the importance of catching outliers!

I had listened to Dr. Bahri’s speech, calling mental health a complex issue. If a certain number of patients were bound to be violent, how did a Terran’s conscience let them take zero preventative measures? There was nothing complicated about allowing sick-minded people to wander among the herd. There might be ill humans among this crew, and Kiara claimed she wouldn’t warn us at all!

I didn’t understand how Terrans without predator disease accepted dangers in their midst. We had to encourage them to take mental illness more seriously, and root it out at a young age. There would be public outcry, once Earth’s public realized they were being exposed to twisted individuals. I couldn’t wait to get out of this office, and scoff about the bunk science to Sam.

The therapist cleared her throat. “I can sense that you’re skeptical, Sovlin. I need you to take our sessions seriously, and trust me to help you. Can you give our methods a chance?”

“Sure. Whatever.” I didn’t need to tip the human off to my plans, to ridicule her entire practice. “I did sign up for this.”

“You told me up-front that you can’t live like this anymore. I commend your courage in seeking help, and I can promise you, you will attain a deeper understanding of who you are as a person. If I might ask, what makes you think that you have ‘predator disease?’”

“I took joy from hurting Marcel Fraser. The only time I feel happy is when I kill an Arxur. I am violent, reckless, and filled with hate.”

“I’d love to hear more about the specifics of your emotions. Where would you suggest those feelings stem from?”

Still not locking me up? I just admitted to violent tendencies…and how good it felt, at the time, to torture an innocent human.

Gritting my teeth, I decided to tell Kiara a small amount. “Predators disgust me, no offense. It’s…it’s been years. The Gojids were fending off a brutal assault, and I was a ship captain. Our defense was going poorly, right up until the desperate charge I’m famed for. Just before we drove them off, I was on a call to wish my daughter

good-night, when Arxur ships reached our neighborhood…"

—

For some reason, I began to spill everything about my past in rambling fashion. Kiara would prompt me whenever my words dried up, and jot notes down on a clipboard. The human didn't discourage the free flow of tears; I was ashamed of how they poured over with every word. The tissue box came in handy, but for some reason, I couldn't stop opening up about the painful topics.

A significant amount of time breezed by, as I recounted my family's death. The tale carried all the way from my suicide charge to the funeral. The astute therapist picked up on my feelings of guilt, for the failed defense of the cradle. The Terran was patient when I broke into hysterics, unable to speak for minutes. She then coaxed me into recalling good memories of my family, including the day my daughter, Hania, was born.

We touched on how I wanted the Arxur to suffer like I had, and how I came across Marcel's patroller. With each passing day of staring into his eyes, I was reminded of every gory detail, as my daughter was ripped apart. The idea that humans were plotting that against the Venlil enraged me; Zarn's intel convinced me that they were an evil race. Meanwhile, my own first officer was being enraptured by the monster?! It was unacceptable.

I had to kill Marcel. I wanted him off my ship, because I thought his thirst for blood defined him.

Kiara didn't bat an eye, as I recounted my heinous acts. She allowed me to discuss the first evidence I saw of human empathy, at the border outposts. The therapist listened with calm nods, while I recounted the horror of seeing my homeworld demolished. My ignorance of humanity's true nature caused that tragedy. Faced with video evidence of Terrans dying for our civilians, I couldn't hide from the fact they could feel like us.

After that last word spilled from my mouth, I hugged a wad of tissues to my snotty nose. Perhaps she understood the cradle's loss, given the undeserved attack on Earth. However, there was no question that I had brought condemnation on our race. That was without even broaching the topic of Cilany's revelation, that our species was predatory ourselves.

Enough of Kiara's time had been wasted, listening to me sob all over myself. I slumped my shoulders, and waited for her judgment.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," the human said. "I can't imagine how difficult it's been to have all of this on your chest, and to deal with such horrible loss alone. I am sorry."

My head snapped up. "You are sorry? I just dumped my issues all over you."

"You did no such thing. The intense emotional reactions you describe, as well as the flashbacks and the depression, all fit with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. What that means…in severe situations, trauma can cause lasting changes to your brain; you become stuck in that moment. There are steps we can take to mitigate your symptoms, including cognitive behavioral therapy and gradual exposure therapy."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to. We are well past our time, but this was an important first step. You did a great job opening up to me. I'd like you to come back tomorrow, so we can continue this conversation."

"I guess I can. You…you're a powerful listener. Humans are so attentive, with your eyes and all."

The therapist set her notes down on the table, and walked me over to the door. It did feel a tiny bit easier to breathe, having shared my journey with someone without judgment. This "PTSD" label I'd heard yet again was a human misunderstanding; we knew that trauma could only spark rapid onset of underlying issues. But I did owe it to Marcel to continue these talking "treatments."

Marcel wouldn't have suggested this if he didn't think it could help, so you have to give it a fair shake. Besides, Kiara seems like a nice enough person…just misguided.

Dr. Bahri pursed her lips. "Before you go, Sovlin, something you said about Marcel caught my attention. What do you mean by 'his thirst for blood?' Did he exhibit violent traits or behavior?"

"No, never," I answered hastily. "I just mean your natural predator instincts. It's actually amazing that your empathy suppresses those, without fail. You know, the whisper in your brain to eat us, whenever you're hungry. Your desire to kill things when you look at them."

“I beg your pardon? We have no such inclinations like you detailed. Is that what you think goes through my mind, when I look at you?”

“It’s okay. I don’t judge you for it…I know you can’t help it.”

“Listen to me. I am telling you those ‘predator instincts’ don’t exist; there is nothing to suppress. Please look up the Venlil empathy tests, and see how we reacted to creatures in pain. Have you ever seen humans respond to blood and gore yourself?”

I nibbled at my claws, and encouraged my brain to ponder the question. On my first mission, when the UN military freed Gojids from that Arxur cattle ship, several soldiers had thrown up. The sight of Gojid corpses left Carlos ashen with disgust; I thought the aversion to gore was strange at the time. The blood hadn’t enticed them, though I’d wondered later if they were repelled by their own unwanted appetites.

“Humans were puking on the cattle ships,” I replied.

Kiara nodded for emphasis. “That is the normal response. We can be trained to kill, but our *natural* reaction is to be saddened by a creature in pain. To struggle to pull the trigger on anything we consider a person. Even trained soldiers often cannot shoot another human, when it comes down to it.”

“You’re seriously telling me there isn’t the slightest part of you that’s drawn to death?”

“Not at all. We don’t just look at an animal and want to kill it. I can guarantee the thought of harming Slanek never once crossed Marcel’s mind.”

“I see…Doctor. Tyler told me humans were aggressive, so I thought…”

“We can have tempers flare up, and aren’t always level-headed and cooperative. That doesn’t mean we like killing. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, Sovlin. Oh, and if you decide to share any of this, would you kindly spread the word that I’m not torturing anyone? I’m here to lend an ear to any ship member that needs it.”

“Okay. I’ll put the word out that I’ve…heard you only chat with people.”

My mind was reeling, as I departed from the therapist's office. Humans had no reason to lie about their instincts, when they'd come clean about their darkest feelings. I had a hard time believing that full-blown predators enjoyed killing less than I did, but the evidence supported that claim. There was so much about the Earthlings that I didn't understand.

It remained to be seen if these sessions offered any benefits, but I decided to go back for a few days. What else was I going to do, while we were docked on Venlil Prime? It would be nice to have a confidant, and if her hand-waving talk treatment had any effects, that miracle would be a welcome surprise.

Chapter 111

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: December 15, 2136

This was my human's first visit to Venlil Prime, and for that matter, to any alien world in a non-military capacity. Tyler and Onso tagged along on our escapade, along with Virnt and a miserable Birla. The Tilfish child's outburst unnerved me, until I remembered Marcel's words about people who were harmless, but different. Predator disease was propaganda, and these specific symptoms needed scientific evaluation.

General Birla agreed to let the humans observe her child's behavior, which proved she was desperate for help. I could tell she would've preferred to return to Sillis. Marcel's reminder that the Federation would torment Virnt might've been the wake-up call Birla needed. The Tilfish general was still hesitant to leave her son alone with a predator therapist. However, Virnt wasn't dropping his "humma" obsession, and was making life difficult for his mother.

An explanation was said to be coming, but the Terrans wished to stretch their legs before tackling serious matters. Marcel marveled at the circular designs of the roads, and even knelt to press a palm to the fall-absorbent sidewalks. Humans didn't stampede-proof their major cities, from what I'd seen on Earth. Meanwhile, Virnt rode on Tyler's shoulder; the blond-haired soldier had warmed up to the little Tilfish.

"Faster! Hummas never get tired," the Tilfish child cheered. "Run across whole planet!"

Birla flicked an antenna suspiciously. "That's…true enough. Care to explain, Marcel?"

The red-haired human smirked. "I do not."

"You never do. Where are we even going?"

"A good question. When I asked, he told me, 'Out,'" I chimed in. "Humans are irritatingly nonspecific. But trust me, *don't* ask about them not getting tired."

Virnt played with Tyler's earlobe. "Humma chase prey…forever?"

The Tilfish general stopped walking down the streets of Venlil

Prime, as the viability of that guess dawned on her. The blond-haired human stiffened; his canines gnawed at his lower lip, clearly discomforted. Marcel leapt up from admiring the sidewalk, and shot a desperate look at me for assistance. I slapped my tail across his nose dismissively, which earned a disbelieving scoff.

“Interesting,” Onso muttered. “That explains why our exchange program banned ‘cardiovascular exercise.’”

Tyler jumped in with a hurried subject change. “Ey Slanek, you asked where we’re heading? Wonder boy here wants to go to a Venlil rescue facility, after he’s done making out with the sidewalk.”

“I was just curious what it was made of!” Marcel wringed his hands through his hair, eyes narrowed with indignation. “It looked like obsidian. Come to think of it, I’ve never asked if Venlil Prime has volcanoes.”

“We do. Most are dormant,” I answered.

Birla still looked rattled by Virnt’s observation. “Wait, what is a Venlil rescue facility? A place for exchange pairings that have gone…wrong? Even your answers only raise more questions.”

“Humans have been freeing people from Arxur cattle farms, starting with the Venlil. Mawsle here—” Tyler began.

“Not my name. It’s four fucking syllables, man. Marcel Fraser.”

“As I was saying, *MawslePhaser* wants to tour the rescued Venlil’s place of residence. Word is, the poor souls just found out we have some unfortunate eyes; it’s pandemonium. All the places we could go, free on an alien planet, and he wants to be a Good Samaritan.”

“No one ordered you to come with me! Hell, I only asked Birla and the little man, because we’re meeting with a friend, of sorts. She was going to help me explain a few things about Virnt.”

“I am surprised he’d spend his leisure time on such…serious matters,” Birla responded.

“Oh, of course he would.” Tyler pressed a hand to one side of his mouth, and leaned toward the Tilfish general conspiratorially. “Marcel walks on water. His shit doesn’t stink.”

Onso gave a devious ear flick. “Don’t you mean Mawsle?”

“Humma Mawsle!” Virnt agreed.

“Nulia will be so happy that your nickname is catching on,” I said, in a sickly-sweet voice. “It’s so mature of you to accept it. You’re a great adoptive father, Mawsle.”

“Gah!” Marcel’s voice took on a bellowing quality, and he fixed a glare inches from my face. I was unimpressed by his charade, and his dazzling eyes had no effect on me. “I’m gonna have Monahan start the ship and leave without ALL of you!”

The Yotul snorted. “Good luck with that. You’re the new guy here. Also, if you think you can give the Cap’n orders, you’re in for a rude awakening. She doesn’t fuck around. I like her.”

Onso’s aggression was notable from the moment I met him; he was my first real contact with a Yotul. It had seemed like a lousy joke when I heard that Tyler was accepted into an exchange program, but I realized how little censoring was needed with this species. Once, I would’ve been leery of this fact, but something about their flippancy made sense. Perhaps this young spacefaring race were the only ones who understood the violent undercurrent I’d unearthed in myself.

I’m learning to trade predatory quips with the Terrans, just like Onso does. I certainly like him a lot more than Tyler’s inexplicable packmate, Sovlin.

Interest flashed in Onso’s eyes, as he noticed my neutral gaze on him. The Yotul wrapped his tail around mine, and dragged me ahead of the predators. Despite Marcel’s dawdling, we were almost at our destination; the current location of the rescue program was a gated institution, per the news broadcasts. Terran soldiers stood by the zig-zagged entrance, and pointed their large assault rifles at the ground.

“You’re the first herbivore that’s treated me as an equal. That hasn’t called me primitive, uplift, or shown open disgust when I speak aggressively,” Onso offered.

I straightened my ears in surprise. “Uh, I know what it’s like to be disparaged, I guess. Tell you what. You don’t call all Venlil weak and emotional, and I won’t use any names against the Yotul.”

“Deal. But I reserve the right to insult you on a personal level.”

“Likewise. I’ve been around humans longer than you…I’m learning.”

“Ha, you’re nothing like I thought you’d be, *especially* from what Tyler said about you. You’re not put off by ribbing.”

“Onso, I’m not the one to judge you for that. I probably have predator disease—”

“Shut the fuck up! *Never* repeat that again. You hear me? You have no idea what they’ll do to you; I’m not talking about humans. Your own people will bleed your soul.”

“Okay…sorry. I’m just saying without my instincts in the driver’s seat, I’ve been more aggressive and unstable. Charging into battle, killing.”

“Shit, you Venlil were probably all sorts of fired up before the Feds got to you. I bet they went to great lengths to tame you. And you probably were a highly empathetic race from the start, but they distorted that. Pick the parts you like and discard the rest.”

“They did that to the Yotul?”

“Yes. It’s surprising, but nice, to have a non-human believe me. Thanks, Slanek.”

Onso broke off our chat, and Tyler raised a questioning eyebrow. Passive concern had lingered in the blond human’s gaze for the entire trip; the Yotul must’ve shared something with him to elicit this response. The marsupial hissed in annoyance, when Tyler rubbed his shoulder comfortingly. Marcel picked up on the tense undercurrent, and narrowed his eyes at the duo.

“Is everything alright?” my human asked.

Onso bared his teeth. “It’s good that you left Dino on the ship.”

“Of course it is.” Birla shuddered, just thinking of the dog. I’d become partial to the domesticated predator, because of his docile behavior. “We wouldn’t want that thing terrorizing Venlil, at a cattle facility, no less.”

“Rescue facility,” Marcel corrected.

“Onso is right. Trust me, two humans are terrifying enough to look at, if you’re not used to it. You’ve both been very nice to me and Virnt, but it’s still a lot. Dogs would have Venlil catatonic on the floor…a public safety hazard.”

The Yotul lashed his tail. “What I meant is they’d burn Dino alive. Harder to do, with him on a ship.”

“Why burn doggy?” Virnt asked.

“Because the dog doesn’t fit with their narrative of predators being evil, and it should suffer for that. That’s why they tried to slaughter the humans—”

Tyler nudged his friend. “That’s enough! Kids don’t need to be told about death and suffering.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

The UN guards at the entrance shared a glance, having heard enough of our conversation. They formed a human wall, moving closer together to block our entrance. We’d deposited ourselves at the facility gate, without any of us noticing the journey was complete. The red-haired officer showed them something on his holopad, and engaged in a series of hushed whispers with the guard.

“This is a sensitive situation, sir, with mass panic abounding,” a guard said. “The only names on this communique are you, the Venlil, and a ‘Birla.’ Even with Ms. Rosario’s invitation, such a large group is inadvisable.”

Marcel shook his head. “Tyler and I would be happy to wear masks. Virnt is an actual child, and Onso’s part of our crew…he can’t be the only man left out, right?”

“The problem is that these Venlil know what’s under the masks now, sir. They think we’re slavering predators who go mad for a lick of blood. When they see large groups of us, they think it’s a hunting pack. I know, it’s batshit crazy, but—”

“Marcel!” A female Terran with dark curls waved a hand at us, and flashed her teeth. Rosario…Sara Rosario, the human astronaut, had invited us? “Come on in, and bring your friends. I’m sure they won’t be any trouble.”

The UN guards stepped to the side, and cleared a path. They took a few extra steps back as Birla passed, which led me to question the wisdom of bringing her here. What if bringing a Tilfish around stressed-out “Gaians” caused them to panic too? This place was a powder keg already; we didn’t need to tempt fate. The last thing I wanted was to disrupt crucial work done toward human acceptance.

However, the *Odyssey* astronaut seemed unfazed by the Tilfish; the glint in her eyes was a mix of wonder and curiosity. I could only

imagine how giddy Sara had been at first contact, partaking in mankind's first opportunity to examine extraterrestrial life. Marcel and I had encountered this influential human twice: throughout my instincts training, and during his painstaking recovery at the outpost. In our first meeting, she had asked if I wanted to seek a new partner, to ensure I wouldn't ditch him in his lowest moments.

I think Sara was pleased when she saw I cared about him as a person. She's probably used to being treated like a faceless monster.

The renowned predator sped back to the facility, and our group followed without comment. I saw humans in opaque helmets wandering the hallways; their postures screamed exhaustion and frustration. On scattered security feeds, I could see Venlil rescues in lifeless stupors. Only a small percent were engaging with their caretakers, and those interactions were filled with tears and fears.

"S-sara?" A timid voice came from a spare room, where I saw a Venlil poring over an interactive textbook. Her coarse pelt looked a bit ragged, though it was showing signs of recovery. "This says your ancient theaters could house tens of thousands of people."

Sara quickened her pace. "That's right, Haysi. Curiously enough, that's still the size of many modern stadiums."

"You're telling me tens of thousands of humans, from *primitive hunting days*, could amass in a central venue, and none of them would kill each other?"

"Correct. We can be entertained without any violence."

"That's…remarkable."

"It's not that remarkable," Onso chimed in.

The Venlil's head snapped up, as our posse filtered through the doorway. She yelped in alarm, and her mottled ears pinned back against her head. Haysi couldn't seem to decide whether to be more afraid of scarred Marcel or towering Tyler. Her fear turned into a full-fledged scream, as both humans smiled. The rescue was gone in a flash, shimmying behind a bookcase.

Sara frowned. "Haysi's shy around newcomers. Still doesn't like humans she doesn't know, and has to take breaks even from being around me. It's progress though; I'm just happy she let me back into her life."

“I don’t mean to be rude, but is there a reason we’re here? I was told you could help with Virnt,” Birla clicked.

“Yes. Why don’t we discuss this out in the hall, and give Haysi some space?”

The Terran scientist steered us back out into the hallway, finding an isolated corner to hold our discussion. She whispered something to Tyler, who flashed her a thumbs up gesture. The blond human took Virnt over to a vending machine, and allowed him to play with the buttons. I eyed the receptacle with longing, wondering if the predators had imported potato chips. Birla sported a look of focused concern, worried about what the humans might say.

Marcel says that predator disease encompasses thousands of unique conditions. That means humans likely have a narrower diagnosis for Virnt.

“I read what Dr. Bahri sent me, and I agree with her advice,” Sara said in a low voice. “As for why my help has been enlisted…I’ve interacted with aliens at length, so I understand your views on mental health as well as our own. Based on what we’ve seen, Virnt would benefit from an autism screening with a specialist.”

“Autism?” Birla echoed. “That word didn’t translate. Is it…what’s the prognosis? What are you going to do with him?”

“Well, not to confuse it with the umbrella term ‘predator disease,’ but autism itself is a spectrum. It can present with any combination of traits and behavior patterns. In general, simplistic terms, social difficulties and repetitive interests are the common denominator. Humans appear to be one of Virnt’s special interests.”

“…okay. How do I fix it? Please, you *have* to cure this interest!”

“It doesn’t work like that, Birla. You’d be better off finding ways to help Virnt deal with his unique challenges, rather than trying to change him. We’re working with alien biology here, so there’s no telling if your brains present the same as humans. But I have a pamphlet here, with an overview of common symptoms in our species.”

“This…this can’t be happening. You said you could cure him, Marcel!”

Marcel scratched his scalp. “Virnt is most likely neurodivergent. He’s not broken, he’s just different. I know in your heart, you love

him and accept him for who he is. You don't want him to change; you want him to be happy."

"And of course, again, we're judging this based on our criteria for our species." Sara wagged her pointer finger, as though drilling the message into Birla's skull. "With the Federation's take on mental health, it's difficult to get any accurate data sets. There's nothing to go off of, and no telling how your conditions mirror or diverge from ours."

I listened in contemplative silence, and mulled over the qualities that Sara had outlined. It was a shame that Birla's pamphlet was translated into the Tilfish lexicon; I couldn't read the full explanation. The scientist hadn't listed anything threatening to the herd as part of Virnt's condition. This sounded like a disconnect with social norms, and a lack of diversity in interests.

Under Federation rule, would a harmless child like this little guy become an outcast…or worse?

Awkwardness caused me to shuffle my paws. "Uh, Sara? Would you mind going into a bit of detail about the symptoms on the pamphlet? I'm curious. I'd like to have something in my head other than predator disease to fall back on."

"On Earth, most individuals on the spectrum have sensory issues," she replied. "They often don't like change, even minor ones, like when Virnt was told he couldn't go to Earth. The good news is that Virnt doesn't seem to have the learning or speech impediments we see in the most severe forms."

Birla twisted her antennae. "Virnt is very bright. He soaks up knowledge like a sponge. I wish there was something I could do to help him though."

"There is. Be supportive of his interests and be patient with him. He may need help expressing his feelings appropriately, as well as distinguishing the feelings of others. He might have difficulty relating to his peers, so an accepting mother could lessen his loneliness and his struggles."

Tyler approached the group with slow steps, and the conversation hushed at once. Virnt was picking at a package of Terran fruit snacks. Rather than stuffing a red one into his mandibles, the Tilfish child tried to cram it inside the blond human's ear. Onso had a

laugh at his partner, as the big guy swatted at his head.

“You fucking terror. Help!” Tyler yelped.

Marcel snickered, before prying Virnt away from the tall predator. My friend returned the fruit snacks, but was careful to keep the Tilfish out of reach of his auditory canals. Sara had a good-natured smirk on her face, though Birla seemed mortified by her son’s mischief.

The Tilfish general scuttled forward. “I am so sorry, Tyler.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” my red-haired buddy jumped in. “Tyler’s just not used to having anything inside his head. It must be nice for him to see what it’s like.”

The blond human raised his fist. “Sara, can you ban him from the exchange program already? That’s predatory behavior there.”

“Why would I ban the cutest duo in the whole program, even if I had that authority?” The Terran scientist flashed her teeth at me, and I ducked my head. “Seriously, Birla, read the pamphlet. I’ll forward information to Marcel about a screening. The advice of a specialist is better than my general knowledge.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that you’ve been so kind to a random child. Anyone but predators would–”

“I don’t need a reminder. The last twenty years of my life were like someone else lived them. Fuck the Federation,” Onso hissed.

Sara furrowed her brow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m fucking splendid, but I’m going to crack some Farsul’s skull before I call it even.”

“Well then. I’ll be happy to show you guys around the facility, and we could use the extra hands…paws. There will be no violent or anti-Federation talk around these Venlil, okay? Please, whatever you’re going through, leave it at the door.”

The Yotul flicked his ears in acknowledgment, as all three humans surveyed him with worry. There must be something about Onso’s backstory that only Tyler knew; from what I had gauged, the Federation diagnosed this marsupial with predator disease due to his aggression. He could’ve been me, after my reckless behavior on Sillis.

Onso was right, when he told me not to use the words “predator

disease" to refer to myself. Even if it was a Venlil's natural state, the humans were the only ones that understood that. I had thought about visiting my family while I was on Venlil Prime, and introducing them to Marcel. However, the fact was that I belonged with predators more than my own people now.

The dark truth had been right in front of my face, every time I felt shame over my own transformation. My parents wouldn't recognize me anymore; they would reject me, if they realized what a violent man I had become. It took coming home to realize that the old Slanek was dead; there would be no return to normalcy.

Chapter 112

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Dominion Sector Fleet*

Date [standardized human time]: December 17, 2136

Proxima Centauri was the site of many human endeavors, which I had guessed due to its constant ship activity. The nearest stellar system to Sol had once been where the Zurulian hospital fleet amassed, to tend to an ailing Earth. Now, it was a bastion of human ships and drones; rapid deployment was possible with a snap of their fingers. This went beyond the colony, which had temporary housing, and the hastily-assembled stations around the worlds.

The fleet that the Terrans were constructing was enormous, and ripe with novelties that I had never seen. Identifying these devices proved difficult, with how out-of-the-box humans could think. An excessive amount of patrollers prowled the system, ready to warp off to Earth or Venlil Prime at a notice. Anti-FTL buoys and other mines saturated the system.

Even Olek and Lisa were wowed by the sights in the viewport. Probes propelled by solar sails could maneuver without emissions. Asteroids had FTL drives strapped to them, and other debris had engines attached as well. Artificial rods and slabs of metal were ready to be slingshotted at an enemy. There were other projectiles I failed to classify, though I was glad none deigned to attack me.

“Fascinating. I thought that visiting a system outside of Sol would lessen the military presence,” I murmured.

Felra’s whiskers twitched. “I had no clue they’d built so many ships, so fast.”

“Our industrial power’s something else in a war economy, huh?” Olek rubbed his eyes, as he strained to make out the details. “Who knows what secret weapons the UN is ready to deploy? Maybe even those death rays they denied existed during the Satellite Wars.”

Lisa looked exasperated as ever. “Olek, the Grand Gulf meltdown and those fires were caused by hacking, not a death ray. And don’t tell me, ‘That’s what they want you to think.’”

“But it is!”

The Dossur giggled, as she paced back and forth across my console buttons. I couldn't believe how quickly the prey animal had grown accustomed to me; she seemed determined to help me. Felra had drilled me on every aspect of Betterment, from their policy goals to the powers of a Chief Hunter. It didn't seem that there was a suitable way out, but I was hoping the United Nations would have some advice.

I stiffened, as a blinking icon appeared on my data feed. "There's a civilian transport approaching us, on an intercept course. Transmitting a looping message…"

"Well? What's it say?" Olek prompted.

Lisa crossed her arms. "I hope it doesn't say, 'Isif is a fraud and a liar.' If he isn't what he claims to be, we're guilty of dereliction of duty."

"Hey! Siffy brought an entire fleet just to rescue me." Felra swept her tiny tail across the console, and bared her teeth in an aggressive gesture. "If that's not honest and caring, what is? Besides, he hasn't eaten me yet."

"I would not dream of such a thing," I hissed. "The message says that humanity is sending a diplomatic envoy aboard."

My blood burned, as I recalled the last boarding party to breach my ship. Waltzing into the heart of Terran territory again wasn't my first option, but I was in hot water. There was no one else to turn to, except the lukewarm United Nations. Knowing General Jones, she'd been keeping tabs on me and expecting my visit.

It seems she was able to keep Zhao from siccing the dogs on me. Our shuttle hasn't been attacked or confronted.

I brought my vessel to a standstill, and tried to trust that Jones had the situation under control. Making my shuttle easy to breach should signal my compliance. A thunk passed through the hull, as the diplomatic transport latched into the side. After affirming that the airlock was sealed and affixed to the UN ship, I unlocked the entrance from our side.

The two UN soldiers, whose formal names were Oleksiy Bondarenko and Lisa Reynolds, snapped upright. Their postures were as stiff as if someone jabbed a taser in their spines, and their flat palms looked glued to their foreheads. My maw locked with disdain, as I

recognized the uniformed man flanking General Jones. She had the nerve to alert Secretary-General Zhao of my movements, and bring him to greet me?

“Chief Hunter Isif,” Earth’s leader proclaimed. “We’re pleased to welcome you to Proxima Centauri.”

General Jones offered a smug smile. “Everything you see here is only the tip of the iceberg. If the Kolshians think they can pick off our allies, one-by-one, and have us sit by and watch, they’re in for a rough week.”

“We can’t defend all of our allied territory with the full might of Terra. But we’re putting the finishing touches on our military spearhead. If we take the fight to them, they’ll have to withdraw their forces,” Zhao concluded.

I chuckled with derision. “You tried that tactic with Kalsim, and he let his own world burn. You humans have a saying about doing the same thing, and expecting a different result, correct?”

“Perhaps it is the definition of insanity. The difference is, the Kolshians care about control and defending their core worlds. Giznel even knows this, from what you passed along to Jones.”

“Zhao knows about me?”

“The SecGen isn’t blind, Isif, he’s not a Feddie,” Jones remarked. “Five Eyes had some knowledge pertinent to the Dominion’s upper echelons that we couldn’t explain. Zhao put two and two together.”

“As much as I’d like to chew her ear off for withholding intelligence, we can’t afford to be divided.” The Secretary-General clasped his hands behind his back. “Earth is fully committed to a total war. If we don’t demolish the Federation’s foundations, we can’t guarantee our citizens’ safety. Would you like to finish, *spymaster* Jones?”

“Gladly. In essence, we have no idea what we’re walking into. The Kolshians’ true strength, and any concealed weapons they have up their sleeves. They clearly believe that Aafa is impenetrable, and we’ll need to pass through other species’ space to get to them. They know our stealth tactics, so we have to fight.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So you have to work your way up to the top.”

“Precisely. The Farsul are the quiet conspirators, and got taken

down a notch post-extermination fleet, but they still held out against an Arxur raid with minimal damage. They claimed to have committed their entire arsenal, yet that clearly couldn't be further from the truth. We can't discount their trickery either."

"That's what we're up against," the Secretary-General said. "We're calling this operation the Phoenix Fleet. Built from the ashes of Earth. Might I give you a personal tour, Isif, as a peace offering between us? Your friends are welcome to join."

The fact was, with my cover in shambles, I needed the United Nations' direction just to survive the next week. My interest in interacting with Zhao was negligible, but I offered a grudging nod. Olek and Lisa were given permission to stand at ease, and relaxed their postures. Jones then sauntered up to the console, inputting a flight course that steered us around various sights.

That glint in her eyes…she already knows the trouble I'm in. Betterment will want my head.

Just to cement her disconcerting omniscience, Jones handed Olek a pair of glasses. The male soldier looked taken aback, muttering something about matching his prescription. I was sure the fact that the UN was spying on me wouldn't embolden his conspiracies at all. Lisa was studying me, and I recalled her suggestion on the shuttle ride for me to defect. As easy as that escape may be, it wouldn't salvage my people's future.

The two human soldiers annoyed me at first, but they were growing on me a tiny bit. They felt more authentic and representative of their kind than Jones or Zhao. With Jones especially, it felt like she was hoarding information as a weapon. The Arxur never plotted to the lengths that Terrans did; that's why, even with Felra's aid, I failed to recover my facade after saving Mileau.

As we glided into the Proxima system, Zhao gestured to a rocky planet. It appeared to be a testing ground for bombs, with occasional missile launches from the planet's surface too. Felra squeaked in alarm, spotting the humans practicing orbital raids. I agreed with the Dossur, at least in pinpointing Earth's motives. There were no uses for long-range antimatter besides pure destruction.

"We are practicing precision strikes from above with smaller warheads, and with larger-yield weapons too." The Secretary-

General pulled up some specs on his holopad, including a few cruise missiles that could be launched from airdropped platforms. “Rest assured, my Dossur comrade, there is a dual purpose for these exercises.”

Felra’s ears quivered. “You’re…practicing raiding Federation planets. Do you intend to let any survive?”

“The United Nations is prepared to reciprocate hostile actions, after what happened on Mileau. However, while civilians may wind up as collateral, they are not explicit targets. The smaller missiles are designed to contain the impact to areas and structures vital to military operations.”

“Then why are you practicing with full-scale warheads?”

“That is a training exercise. We’re attempting to construct a ground intercept system, which can detonate orbital munitions before they hit the surface. It’s the same idea as a missile defense system such as the Iron Dome.”

“We’re practicing how many planetary strikes we can intercept and improving our technology,” Jones added. “Also, with all the reverse engineering we’ve done, we have many new additions to our fleets. If I may…”

My shuttle continued on its charted course, peeling away from the testing ground. If Earth had been able to stop missiles before they impacted the ground, perhaps their losses would’ve been less severe. It was incredible how quickly the humans were improving. Their innovation was unsurpassed, and I could see the beginnings of a galactic superpower falling together.

If the Terrans had a few months to get everything in order, this would all be a different story. They are a driven species, to come from their first FTL ship to this in months.

Felra’s fear scent still lingered in the air, but her eyes glistened with curiosity. I could only imagine how she felt, touring a predator’s killing devices after learning that her friend was an Arxur commander. To exacerbate our dilemma, she had watched me tear four Kolshians apart like it was nothing! I reminded myself to explain to the Dossur that humans couldn’t have done this without allied manufacturing power. Even in war preparations, they proved themselves a social species that outshone the Arxur.

“Are you okay?” I whispered. “This is a more up-close-and-personal view of human killing abilities than you likely intended.”

Felra chuckled, though the nerves seeped into her tone. “I was curious about joining an exchange program, but this is more than I bargained for. I could do with a little more petting, and less bombs.”

Lisa coughed. “I heard that. Careful what you wish for.”

The shuttle approached a drone hub, which appeared to include self-piloted hospital ships. The Terrans wouldn’t need to divert any qualified helmsmen to ferry the medics into battle. General Jones fiddled with my console, determining how to highlight items on the viewport. Her binocular eyes sparkled with pride; the drone program was her brainchild.

“Not only are we experimenting with varying drone sizes, and with automating certain functions even in manned ships…but we’ve also crafted mini-drones.” The spymaster’s rosy lips turned up, and she highlighted a handful of specks. “Small enough to fit in my hand, and you can fly ’em like steered bullets. Good luck targeting something so tiny.”

My growl vibrated with appreciation. “They could find chinks in armor and be rigged to explode. Or be used as scouts, alongside those solar sail probes you have.”

“I’m glad to speak to someone who appreciates our craftsmanship. Tarva, bless her heart, gets this blank look in her eyes when I delve into military details, and General Kam just acts like a cheerleader. I’m not sure he knows what he’s applauding.”

“You’ve learned of our shield-breaking technology, with how we kicked Shaza’s hind end with it.” Zhao flashed his teeth, insufferable in his haughtiness. “You see the drones in a simulated engagement, portside? They can take out enemy shields now, optimally, without human input.”

“Hrrr, shield-breakers. That’s all well and good until they turn that tactic back at you, yes? Element of surprise…gone.”

“Keep watching. The ships they’re firing at—look what happens during a shield outage.”

My pupils surveyed the viewport, and I parted my maw with curiosity. Felra climbed up onto my shoulder, getting a better view

of the action. The human armaments were duking it out with phony weaponry, and that included a simulation of shield breaker input. They had accounted for such devices being used against them, after all.

Terran craft that lost shields deployed a platform in front of them, which assembled itself into a wall. These fortifications provided an extra layer of defense for human ships, and could absorb lethal munitions being used against them. It was easy enough for the UN to shoot through the gaps, while the enemy's return fire couldn't thread the barrier. I wasn't sure if it was the simplicity or the far-reaching effects of their ingenuity that impressed me.

"That is clever, Zhao. Whenever you are done showing off, hrrr, I could use your help," I hissed through gritted teeth.

The Secretary-General glanced at me. "The showing off has a point. We are aware of your troubles, but there's no walking back what happened at Mileau. You should call for an open rebellion against the Dominion."

"Zhao is right. You have access to the rebel forums to share what you know, and you have the confidence of two sector fleets," Jones ascertained. "Remind them of how well Earth fed them. We've shipped the non-sapient cattle, which we agreed to at Sillis, to your headquarters. A start, if you're smart with it."

"That is *madness*!" My roar reverberated throughout the ship, making every human but Jones flinch. "We're not ready to fight Betterment. Not without human help, which you won't give! Food won't fix that."

"It's the hierarchy of needs, Isif. Feeding your people will free their focus to fight intelligently. You have access to fleetwide communications. Perhaps you could offer sanctuary to 'defectives' as well."

"What about human help, Jones? You refuse to fight a two-front war. And you say it has a point, but you haven't expanded upon the purpose of your boasting either!"

The Secretary-General pursed his lips. "I'll answer this one. What I'm showing you here is that we have a fighting chance against the Federation. We're going to slay a giant, or at least try to. We can't offer you anything today, Isif…but if we make it out in decent

shape, humanity will aid you."

"That's not now! I'm supposed to campaign on hope and an empty promise?"

"I don't make empty promises. Look at how far we've come; you must believe that we can end the Federation. You need to hold out, to keep yourself and your movement alive, until we finish this fight. Will you give it a shot?"

Felra twitched her whiskers, a sign of encouragement. If my Dossur friend thought this crackpot plan was worth the effort, then perhaps I could try to stand up to the might of Betterment. An influential Arxur like myself was the leader figure a rebellion needed; I'd proven my might in battle, and I knew how to command fleets. The question was whether I could convince enough soldiers to join me.

"I guess we're going to *try* to overthrow the Dominion," I sighed, ignoring Felra's happy squeak. "Humans, if you believe we could ever have a better future, as I do, you will help me. Any way you can."

"We will." Zhao extended his hand, and I gripped it reluctantly. "Not to sound like Jones, but you can't trust anyone. Keeping you alive will be key. You know that; that's why you've wandered for weeks without an armed escort."

"Your point is?"

"Perhaps you would trust human soldiers as your full-time guards? If Bondarenko and Reynolds here are up to the task, that is; I cannot give them that order in good faith. It's a dangerous assignment, beyond the scope of what any soldier signed up for."

Olek grinned. "Being on the inside of spy insurrection shit…sir? I'm in."

"If it helps the United Nations, and swings the balance toward galactic peace, I'm in too, sir," Lisa responded.

I narrowed my eyes. "I could live with keeping them around. Thank you. And Felra, do you want to stay with the humans? It won't be safe, and there'll be…lots of Arxur. War and death."

"You're not getting rid of me. I said we'd figure it out together. Someone's gotta teach you how to express your emotions, and who better than a special gal like me?"

Zhao wandered to my console. “You’ve got yourself a crew then. Now, let’s help you draft your statements, shall we? Unofficially, of course.”

If someone had told me before the cradle’s fall that I would start a rebellion with generals of pack predators, I would’ve thought it was absurd. That was without mentioning the fact that I had one of the smallest herbivores perched on my shoulder. Our unlikely posse began penning the words of sedition, and I wondered whether any Arxur would come to my side at all.

The state of affairs in the galaxy was heating up in a hurry. I hoped that Zhao’s bluster bore tangible results; my species’ fate hinged on the humans’ success against the Kolshians and the Farsul. For all the primates had accomplished, while staring down insurmountable odds, this was the stretch that would determine victors and losers.

The military Earth had spawned in a matter of months needed to be enough to take down the Federation’s kingpins, or all of us were doomed.

Chapter 113

Memory transcription subject:*Glim, Venlil Rescue*

Date [standardized human time]: December 19, 2136

The days since the raid against Venlil Prime had climbed into the double digits; ten days ago, every rescue learned the Gaians' dark secret. I could recall the panic of being rushed to a bunker, by a predator whose name I didn't even know. There were thousands of them packed in my vicinity, beady eyes glistening in the darkness. It brought back terrible memories, ones I'd tried to blot out from my mind.

I could still recall each of the numbers on my brand, torched into my neck in the Arxur lexicon; I could recite them by heart. When I was pried loose and herded around as the grays' plaything, I wasn't Glim. It was as if I could observe myself from the outside there, and distance myself from the binocular eyes scanning me as a scrumptious kill. The bunker humans left me overstimulated and slipping back into torturous times.

Noah would've known to comfort me, but he wasn't there. The Terran ambassador was neck-deep in the Duerten negotiations, which had borne little fruit. Instead, I'd huddled within the bunker in a shaken heap, feeling claustrophobic and trapped among the predators. When the Gaian who saved me carried me outside, I could breathe again, ever so slightly.

How had the other cattle felt, having not already known that HUMANS were under those masks? I knew who they were, and it's still taken me days to process that experience.

As an abstract concept, I could handle the reality of the predator infestation on Venlil Prime. My caretaker, by himself, was a welcome sight; I felt the smallest warmth, when Ambassador Williams rushed to visit me in the aftermath. It had taken me days to be able to speak with him though, after the bunker ordeal fried my neurons. Thousands of eyes, scattered throughout the periphery…the human presence….

I shook my head, and prayed that my voice wouldn't leave me today. The Terrans hadn't hurried me along, despite the breakdown of order among the rescues. However, my promise to aid them in

getting through to the cattle hadn't left my memory. I was supposed to deliver a speech the night of the raid, but I'd clammed up after the nightmare within an enclosed space.

"…so the Duerten are stringing us along. Now, they're asking to see a rescue from the cattle farms!" Noah lightly draped an arm over my shoulders, which made me flinch. I'd zoned out as we were walking toward the auditorium. "Glim, you good? You told me you were all there."

I clasped the folded-up speech notes tighter in my paw. "Yeah. P-perfectly fine. I'm just on edge from the raid. Haven't been able to get out of that headspace."

"Are you sure that's it?"

"Totally. Say, I'm surprised to see Haysi and Sara talking."

"Hm, she still screams and hides at every human but Sara. To think that you and her are rays of sunshine—you're so clearly afraid of us, yet most rescues have renounced our kind altogether. The majority will never come around."

"I'm going to try to help you with that. Oh, uh, what were you saying about the Duerten?"

"We need their ships, Glim; it's no secret. The Duerten want to see what we've done for the farm rescues, and that means putting some poor soul through an inquisition." The human rubbed his short scalp, pursing his lips. I found myself wishing he'd don his old helmet. "I hate to ask even more of you, but I think you're the closest thing we have to an objective voice."

I pinned my ears back. "If it gets me out of this place…I'll do it."

"So you're good with leaving straight from the speech? I don't mean to rush you, but the Federation is knocking on our doorstep. Each day we squander, they're getting closer to us. To our friends."

"I said I'll help. Leave whenever."

Sooner, rather than later, I hope. I need to clear my head.

Noah donned his mask, and my breathing felt much less strained. The human remained off to the side in the hallway, but pointed to a lectern in a conference room. Disaffected rescues had been shown to the area, and a few chattered nervously about the predators' intentions. There was a camera to record my words, for the Venlil

that hadn't been coaxed to the meeting area.

I unfolded my speech notes, and surveyed the words I'd written before the raid. My conviction had been tested at every turn; I didn't know how I could muster any persuasive abilities. Someone had to give these traumatized Venlil an explanation, if they were to attain any solace. It was shocking to discover the sweet species, who waited on us hand and foot, had the form of our enemy. I leaned closer to the microphone, summoning all of my strength.

"Hello everyone. To answer your burning question, the Gaians hide their faces because they know what they are. A predator race. They rationalize the deepest evils with ease, and their past rivals the Arxur's in its h-horribleness." My voice came out flat, save for the last stutter. Nervous gasps tailed from the audience, and I tried to add gusto to my tone. "Their real species name is human; the Federation has known about these wicked flesh-eaters for centuries. As an exterminator, and someone who has faced the same evils of captivity as you, I've encountered the worst predators. They are everything I've fought against and then some."

Noah stiffened in the hallway. Several Gaians began to start toward me, perhaps to cut off my speech; they thought that I was generating additional panic. I could feel my caretaker's awful eyes on me through the helmet, before he decided to trust what I was doing. The Terran ambassador extended an arm, holding his colleagues back.

Scrawled in red ink, I read my hasty additions to the speech, which I tacked on last night. Addressing current events was important, both for these Venlil and myself. This was about reminding myself why these primates were nothing like the Arxur who tortured me.

"But all of you know that humans act kind and endearing to us. You saw them save Venlil, while the weaker predators cowered alongside us." *That was what really happened, Glim—you saw it. Your logical brain knows this, but it's like someone turned a faucet of memories back there.* "Thousands of them locked with us for hours, across from makeshift hospitals their people set up. Inundated with fear scent and copious amounts of blood. The EMTs clasped packets in their hands and *didn't drink them*."

The Gaians seemed taken aback by my last note, but among the crowd, I saw a few tail swishes recognizing that oddity. There had

been many things I'd regarded in the outside world, which suggested the predators had carved out ordinary lives here. Venlil and humans intermingled across the capital, and banded together in the war. Clearing my throat, I hurried through the last bit of my speech.

"I escaped this very facility weeks ago, and the world I saw wasn't enslaved or suffering. I saw these *predators* playing fine-stringed instruments, trading fruits, and talking piteously about us. My caretaker pulled me back from an oncoming train, saving my life, and held me when I mourned a familial tragedy. He felt empathy, as proven by our scientific tests, and he didn't shy away from his species' worst moments.

Humans, Gaians…they aren't the least bit predictable, but I believe that they won't harm us *today*. Is that enough? All I can say is that we've seen them do more than kill, inside and outside these walls. Despite knowing the danger of predators, the Venlil decided to trust them. We have to trust the herd, or we have nothing."

I flicked my ears a single time, and slunk away from the podium. That was the best declaration I could drum up for the rescues; I hoped it was what the humans wanted from me. Perhaps Noah wished I was less honest about their flaws, though he didn't challenge me. My helmeted caretaker merely waved a hand, and guided me outside to a car. Being locked in an enclosed space with a predator jogged the horrible memories again, but I kept that thought to myself.

I tried to shut off my brain, hoping to dissociate during transit. Fielding Duerten questions, on behalf of humanity's diplomatic outreach program, might be a good way to ground myself. It was a distraction at the least, one which I was relieved to have. Why couldn't I get better?

—

The ornate exterior of the governor's mansion sparkled in the sunlight, as we pulled up near the reception lawn. A female avian with dull gray feathers waited under an awning; she was clearly expecting our arrival. It was uncommon to see Duerten outside their systems, since their species denounced individual ambitions. Setting out to a foreign world on their own went against the Homogeneity's collectivism.

I risked a glance at Noah, who had long-since abandoned the helmet. The human ambassador was unusually quiet, with a despondent look tugging at his lips. At first, I presumed it was because I was ignoring him, but he didn't even notice we had arrived at our destination. Reaching out with a hesitant paw, I jostled his meaty hand. The Gaian blinked in rapid succession.

Do I really want to know what he was lost in his head about?

"Noah…what's wrong?" I murmured.

The astronaut forced a snarl. "Don't worry about it. You have your own problems, Glim, which are much heavier than mine. Besides, we've got to go. The Duerten ambassador is right there waiting for us."

"She can wait ten seconds for you to tell me. I'll feel better knowing."

"If I tell you, will you promise to get out and talk to the Duerten, without any additional questions or comments to me?"

"…fine."

"The stampedes. I can't stop thinking about it all—the bodies, the calamity. Thousands died, even with our help. Tarva says that's normal during emergency evacuations on Venlil Prime."

"That's what you're brooding about? It's sad, Noah, b-but there's nothing you can do about it."

"No! I just, I could've done things differently *before*. I know for a fact that everyone on this world was sent to bunkers, when Sara and I first showed up. How many people did we kill by saying hello? Those casualties were directly caused by our arrival. An unintended consequence."

"Oh."

Remembering my promise not to press Noah further, I slid out of the car. There was nothing I could say to comfort him, unless he was feigning empathy to tug at my heartstrings. He must've noticed that I was pulling away from everyone, in the wake of the raids; it was never certain his feelings were authentic. The human ambassador's gaze scorched into my back, and he shimmied out after me. With forced cheeriness, he waved to the Duerten ambassador.

“Ambassador Coji. It’s wonderful to see you!” Noah’s abrupt shift in demeanor left me questioning just how well he could act. “This is Glim. He was rescued during an exchange negotiated by the UN Secretary-General. I’ve been helping him settle back into Venlil life.”

Coji’s bill was lengthy and curved, and looked threatening when it was pointed toward me. The Duerten studied me with a haughty aura, not saying a word. The lack of a basic greeting soured any goodwill I had toward this avian, but I remembered what Noah said about the importance of gaining their ships. Humanity must have endless patience, to keep trying at diplomacy without any results.

“Glim? Say something?” the human prompted.

I curled my lip. “Hello.”

“Apologies for his shortness, Madam Ambassador. I’m sure you understand the trauma he’s recovering from. Feel free to ask him any questions you like.”

“I’d rather do so without humans monitoring him,” Coji clicked.

The Duerten’s cold request rubbed me the wrong way, with how she was giving orders as a guest. If Noah was phased by being told to sod off, he didn’t show it. The Terran dipped his head in a respectful gesture, and backed away with careful steps. His pupils studied me with concern, and I straightened my ears to show I could handle it.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone for a few minutes. But I’ll have to circle back shortly; this is only Glim’s second time out of the facility. His welfare is important to me,” the predator responded, to be greeted with silence. “Okay then. Good luck?”

Noah seems more awkward than usual. I can’t blame him, not receiving any positive cues from the Duerten.

Coji inspected me once the Gaian vanished. “Has that human talked about Mileau at all, Glim?”

“Mileau…the Dossur homeworld?” I asked.

“I’ll take that as a no. In short, the Kolshians raided the planet and are doing stars know what to the populace. These Terrans made sure to give us all the details, but they care so little for their allies. It’s just propaganda to them! They use it as a *tragedy* to show what

the Federation has done, yet they're doing nothing to take it back. They won't protect their allies, when push comes to shove…except for the Venlil."

"I thought you wanted to ask me about the cattle rescues. I don't know why you're talking to me about this."

"Because, you've heard what they really think. You won't just defend them blindly like your government does. Humanity could glass her own world, and Tarva would be on television the next day talking about how wonderful they are. They just want our ships. They think the Homogeneity doesn't know they plan to use us, and discard our lives."

"Ambassador Coji, er, I—"

"What incentive do we have to go against the Kolshians? We don't want to fight them. We don't even like humans: they're loud, selfish, and brutish, in the presentable version of themselves. Noah's happy to woo us into getting slaughtered, and fan the flames of war. I don't like him either, and I want nothing to do with their whole alliance!"

Listening to someone else insult my caretaker boiled my blood, despite my jumbled emotions. It was true, by the Ambassador's private admission, that humanity was trying to flip neutrals to their small alliance for manpower. However, if the Federation had actually raided the Dossur's homeworld, how could that be turned against Noah? These Duerten were just wasting the Terrans' time, and that pissed me off.

"You're a fucking moron!" I screamed. "You could use the humans to your advantage. If you were smart, you'd realize they were desperate and set the terms. You want to be protected, then specify that! You could probably ask for their help freeing Duerten cattle too; they're good at that. I'm not sure what you want from them, but they'll do it."

The long-billed avian leaned back. "To our advantage? Involving ourselves with attacking fellow herbivores…it's out of the question. They'll bring torment upon us, and the Terrans can't even fend 'em off."

"Why don't you involve yourself solely with stopping attacks? For the love of stars, all you have to do is send a few ships to human-

allied planets. I don't get why you wouldn't want to send a clear message, before the Kolshians turn on you or your friends. It's Arxur behavior, and it must stop. If Mileau is being plundered, that's disgusting."

"I agree, Glim. But this is why none of the races who talked to humanity will pledge support. It's hard to stick your neck out."

"It's not hard. You want the humans to save the Dossur, and you know damn well they don't have the numbers. Why? Because you won't lift a wing to help. You don't have to publicly declare support, or do a thing you don't want to! Help care for the rescued cattle from the Sillis battle. Defend prey from attack, and nothing else. If you want Mileau recovered, then you and *dozens* of others need to contribute."

Panicked footsteps ran down the walkway, so Ambassador Noah must've heard the commotion. I'd raised my voice to a staggering level, in my initial outburst. His binocular eyes were wide with alarm, and he raised his hands in a placating gesture. I could feel anger simmering off him, as he all but wrenched me away from Ambassador Coji. The Duerten was stewing over my words, and she studied the predator for several minutes.

"I have a proposal, predator. You get this one chance to accept it, and you may not counter-offer." Coji moved her beak inches from Noah's cheek, and I could see my caretaker trying not to shy away. "We'll send a few dozen ships to your weakest worlds' garrisons. We will only intervene in the event of an attack on prey; that means *not Earth*, and no offensive aid. You have no control over our ships, and you don't order us around."

The Terran looked surprised. "O—"

"I wasn't finished. Furthermore, we will not be openly on humanity's side. We don't want to fight the Kolshians, unsure of their capabilities; nobody does. We will reach out to dozens of our allies to help retake Mileau. A full-fledged attempt to reclaim it is a mandatory condition of the deal, and we expect humanity to send the bulk of the force. It has been days, and you've done nothing."

"We wish to help, really. But there's forty-thousand of them…the number of ships we'd have to send to contest their claim would be too high. We couldn't afford to take those kinds of losses, or to merely lose half of the craft we send. Even if we succeeded, we'd be

leaving every other system, including our own, open to attack."

"I don't care about your system. I care about the Dossur, and I expect thousands of your ships in the rescue fleet. Do you accept our terms?"

"Yes. Yes, we do. Thank you, Amb—"

"I'm leaving. Quit talking."

It was striking how Coji deigned to speak to Noah, and how casually the human brushed off the insults. His brown eyes watched, as she fluttered over to the reception lawn. The visitor boarded her spacecraft in a hurry. The predator leaned back, and waited until the Duerten had taken to the skies. Ambassador Williams then flashed his teeth, throwing an excited fist pump into the air.

"How did that happen? What the hell did you say, Glim?" the Gaian asked. "I mean, first off, I don't have the authority to make that deal, but I'm sure the UN will accept it. Besides, if I didn't say yes, she would've taken it off the table."

I tilted my head. "I told her she should set the terms. That's what that Duerten really wanted: control. Sorry that she, um, took my advice in a forceful direction. Aren't you angry?"

"Oh, not at all, you brave, wonderful Venlil. You just gave us the ability to increase our friends' defenses, and try to take back Mileau. We can win this war! Peace, that's all we want in the whole wide universe."

The predator was radiating excitement, though the impact of this moment was starting to hit me. I might've just tipped the war's balance in humanity's favor; there was no telling if their proclaimed intentions of peace would end up being the truth. Dwelling on that wouldn't help my shattered mind, though. A Federation that bullied its own people into submission, and used secret fleets for conquest, was no better than whatever Earth would do.

Noah seemed to have a good heart, so I needed to continue accepting that at face value. The rest of his kind were ambiguous hunters to me, but I knew his character was pure and polite. He was deserving of my trust. It remained to be seen how the Terran alliance fared in its next battles, but I hoped they'd retake Mileau and kick the Kolshians in the teeth.

Chapter 114

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: January 14, 2137

Standing in the cargo bay of the ship, gun in paw, numbness gripped my limbs. A spate of nightmares had plagued me throughout the journey, though they'd started in earnest on Venlil Prime. I often saw Marcel being held at gunpoint, or with an Arxur bullet drilling into his helmet. The fiery stampedes on both the cradle and Sillis were etched into my memories as well. Sometimes, it was realistic enough that I could feel ash worming its way down my throat.

It was as if my soul was missing in the downtime, with the lack of gunfire. In most visions, I found myself carrying a gun, like the one I toted now. Remembered emotions flooded back, and I envisioned my claws pulling the trigger. Reality made sense when I was on the battlefield; coming back to civilian life on Venlil Prime had been what was alien. In my heart, I knew Onso was right about professing my predator-diseased aggression.

Marcel hadn't wanted to tempt fate, but I was itching to get back into the fray. The predator refused to let me go alone, even if he'd been involved in enough ground occupations for one year. I understood that this was what life was now, in order for humans to survive. *Killing, killing, and more killing.* Though…if I forgot the reason I was doing it all, my mind might collapse. By this third deployment, I hoped to detach from the horrors a little; violence was merely a certainty.

"When are you coming home, Mawsle?" Nulia's voice trailed from his holopad, alongside a grainy image of the Gojid's face. "You missed Cwismiss. I made a gingerbread house with Momma Lucy!"

The red-haired human smiled. "That's awesome! I don't know when I'll be home. But with me…and Slanek gone, you had more to eat for yourselves. You don't want the Salt Monster learning the joys of sugar, do you?"

"No! But…I miss you lots."

The Terrans had gotten an FTL comms network up and running weeks ago, and the technology had finally been passed along to

soldiers and civilians. It was easier than ever for humans to chat with aliens in allied systems, while also making it possible for troops to call their loved ones. I could admit a tinge of jealousy over Marcel's calls with his family. He had people who he knew would accept him, and he also looked happier talking with them than me.

All that energy I spent caring about his welfare, and I would always be second-rate to him. It felt like I was on an island, without anyone to support me. Hell, Marcel had humiliated me in front of Sovlin, insisting on us rolling over like prey! There were some things that couldn't be forgiven; I couldn't believe he'd pushed me to talk to that Gojid.

I'm just happy we've left Monahan's ship. I wish I took that Gojid's head off while I had the chance…it's a shame I was too injured to see it through.

I flexed my healed shoulder. "It's time to get ready, Marc. We're almost in range of Mileau."

"Alright," he hissed, perhaps sensing my jealous tone. "I've got to go, Nulia. You be good for your mother now, alright? You've got to do your chores."

"Do I really have to?" the Gojid whined.

"You do, if you don't want Santa to put you on the naughty list next…Cwismiss. If you're good, you'll be rewarded in the end. Besides, you want to make our lives easier, right? It's been a hard year for us too."

"*Fine.* I love you, Mawsle."

"Love you too. Tell your mo—"

Marcel sighed, as the Gojid abruptly hung up. He fixed his hazel eyes on me, and shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant way. The human tickled the tip of my tail, causing my bushy appendage to jerk away. Watching him flash his teeth in a playful manner, I felt a bit better. My dependency on my best friend for happiness might be unhealthy, but I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Terran soldiers were filing into transports, preparing to detach from our current carrier once we neared the target. Mission objectives ranged from inserting boarding parties into enemy ships, to retaking space stations by force. Clearing out Mileau itself would be an arduous task; it had taken weeks for the Kolshians to set down

roots, and it could take an equal amount of time for them to be removed. That was assuming we prevailed against their secretive fleet.

“It concerns me what conditions we’ll find the Dossur subjected to. To think that they hate us so much, that they’ll brutalize anyone who tries to befriend us,” Marcel growled.

I pinned my ears in hesitation. “Um, is it true that the Arxur fought alongside the Dossur? I know it’s a rumor, but it has me nervous they’re here. Every time we land, they seem to show up and kill everyone. We’re cursed.”

“Hey, it’s only happened twice, but there is a pattern forming there. Mileau might not want us two among the boots on the ground, buddy. Hell, I do feel a little cursed.”

“The Arxur. You’re dodging.”

“Yes…Chief Hunter Isif himself helped them at our request, or so I hear. The grays were only able to weed out a few thousand attackers, though that’s a handful we don’t have to face. We were able to get a couple hundred evac ships out because of his fleet, which took a beating for us.”

“The Kolshians gave a beatdown to the Arxur?!”

“You could say the kid gloves are off, Slanek. You could also say they had the power to stop the grays, and let billions die instead.”

I loaded onto a transport in silence, appalled by the truth of his words. The Federation allowed entire species to be genocided, and billions of sapients to be taken as cattle, to retain control. Had they really concealed their true power just to encourage fear? The Kolshians hadn’t wanted to win the war, and I couldn’t think of a single other reason why. That realization culminated in fury; I was raring to plunk a bullet into their skulls.

My biological brother died fighting the Arxur, because the Kolshians willed it so. Everything we’ve ever done has been frivolous! All of this haunting death was for naught…

Our transport had its own ability to monitor communications, and a digitized replica of the bridge’s viewport. We could transition between the host carrier’s eyes and our own, once we were cast into the stars. It was true that humanity had also faced numerical odds at Khoa and Sillis, and that they had triumphed all the same. By

this point, I imagine the Kolshians had an answer for the shield-breakers, though.

While we were at less of a numerical disadvantage this time, assuming our new "allies" showed up, our fleet would mainly be comprised of prey races. The Terrans must be expecting them to be discombobulated liabilities, but the Duerten had been unequivocal about not accepting human direction or crew. We'd raised thirty-five thousand of our own ships, but only seven thousand of those were UN vessels.

At least the Duerten had showed up—the military staff at the briefing hadn't been certain they'd uphold the deal. As one of the galaxy's two avian species, they were oddballs even before humanity's announcement. Their support ships were nothing groundbreaking, but they were able to raise an army to retake Mileau in a few weeks. Their fleet was waiting on the fringes of the Dossur's system, prior to our arrival.

According to the initial communications coming through on our systems, they were calling their alliance the Duerten Shield. They'd gotten 44 races to donate a few hundred ships each, which was more than our prior total of allied species. I suppose we couldn't argue about their effectiveness, despite the flippant demeanor they hurled at humanity.

"We are going to attack now. You predators will help," a Duerten commander spoke curtly to the human fleet.

The UN's reply was instant and unfazed. "Copy that. We're right behind you, Duerten Shield."

The Terran armada was laden with novelties, and our newer vessels had a barebones crew thanks to the automation of duties. The plan was for older vessels to be retired or retrofitted to require less personnel. However, Earth's current focus was sending out anything with guns and FTL engines. They wouldn't be scrapping any ships that had endured the prior battles. That was why Captain Monahan and our Sovlin-bonded idiot friend, Tyler, were being sent to enemy-occupied territory at the Federation's heart.

Automated vessels pressed forward on the UN's front lines, though the foolhardy Duerten insisted on leading the charge. Our hospital ships lingered on the fringes, ready to move in as needed. According to Marcel, humans considered such vessels

noncombatants, but I imagined the Kolshians thought any predator ship was fair game.

“Here we go,” Marcel murmured.

Thousands of enemy ships approached on the viewport feed, pulling away from patrols of the system. They had been ready to face intruders at a moment’s notice. Mileau was encased by a multi-layered defense, and various stations were also fortified to the max. The Kolshians had ships that I didn’t even recognize from Federation classes: for instance, cylindrical vessels that looked like a drainage pipe, and odd pyramidal craft. A few executed maneuvers that would’ve killed any crew. Either they had inertial dampeners that broke the laws of physics, or more likely…they had drones.

The Kolshians couldn’t have figured out and built autonomous ships in a month. The Terrans aren’t the only ones to think of such a thing?

My human’s hazel eyes stretched wide, with the same realization. “Since when do they have drones? You didn’t even know what those are, Slanek.”

Similar chatter erupted among the soldiers, with many offering some vulgar words about our enemies. Other predators clad in armor were crammed into my transport, as we were packed in for deployment. The plan for our particular unit was to retake a civilian research station, close to an outer planet. That meant getting past this Kolshian fleet; they’d seemed to have dropped the prey façade entirely.

That meant that humans were their first threat that required them to uncork their true power. Even the Arxur never offered a true challenge to their stranglehold on the galaxy, despite being presented as an undefeatable menace. It was clear in the Kolshian-Farsul arrangement which ones were the enforcers, and which ones were the brains.

“They have these since they realized *you* have drones,” I answered. “Or rather, they show that they have it.”

Marcel chewed his lower lip. “Of course. A manned vessel can’t make decisions at the same speed. Fight fire with fire. Good thing we stepped up our game too.”

The high-stakes clash had commenced on our screens; humanity was following the cues of our so-called friends, who led a reckless

charge. Kolshian drones were clinically dissecting the first Duerten Shield ships to draw within firing range. The oddly-shaped enemies made targeting wonky, and forced the avian alliance to switch to manual firing. Even a human would have difficulty targeting a computer-piloted craft, with its calculating ability.

The Duerten panicked, tossing out munitions without aiming at all. The Federation was unrelenting against our allies, dispatching missiles amidst their ranks. More gasps came from the humans, as Duerten shielding flickered out across the front line. I was inclined to believe that particular weapon was reverse engineered. The Shield's neat V-formation was collapsing, and ships nestled behind the leaders retreated toward the UN ranks. Perhaps they should've let us lead the way after all.

I guess we'll see what Marcel was saying about stepping up their game. It follows that he was referring to drones, but what improvements could they make?

Sensing my confusion, the vegetarian gestured to an inlaid sensor feed. In the vastness of space, the tiny specks were nigh invisible; the microscopic craft barely registered on the data screen either. Even with the viewport zoomed in to the maximum magnification, I wasn't sure these Terran miniatures were visible to the naked eye. It was easy for an unassuming Kolshian to write them off as debris.

"Can something that small even scratch a ship?" I felt a shudder pass through the carrier, as a wave of our cruisers and fighters dispatched to save the scattered Duerten. "I don't get how it could have any guns or missiles."

Marcel grinned. "Ah, Slanek. It *is* the missile."

The humans' larger drones dispatched a series of shield-breaking missiles, which the Kolshian craft tried in earnest to deflect. Enough slipped through to cause shield outages, and our nanodrones closed the gap all the while. The United Nations hurled traditional munitions at the enemy, making them think our sole play was shield damage. Seconds later, miniature craft detonated across Federation hulls; dozens of orange twinkles ravaged single enemies.

Explosions were generally inadvisable right atop the engine compartment, and these drones were tiny enough to slip through armor chinks. Surviving Kolshian automatons pulled back to regroup and recalibrate shields. The Duerten Shield lingered with

uncertainty, as we pressed ahead toward Mileau. The avian alliance was still reeling; they'd lost thousands of ships to our nemesis' unexpected technology.

There was no shortage of enemy vessels remaining within Mileau's surrounding vicinity. Our allies were a bunch of dunces, and the Kolshians had a nearly endless supply of ships to throw at us. The humans needed to fight their way close enough to deploy foot soldiers, while turning twenty-eight thousand liabilities into a serviceable force. Perhaps the Duerten were more willing to follow our direction now, with their pride wounded.

"Duerten Shield, why don't you let us head in first?" The UN transmitted a message over the communication channel. A few soldiers in the transport were scoffing at the avians' showing; the Duerten talked a lot of smack, only to be humbled so quickly. "You can fill in the gaps and the flanks, playing a supporting role. You're good at that."

"You're m-manipulating us!" answered a shaken avian. "You don't order us around. We won't answer to your whims and wants. You disgust us."

"Well, whether you like us or not, we're on the same side of this battle. This is what you wanted: humans handling the brunt of this mission. You'd rather have us predators dying than your own people. Don't make me beg to have my troops perish for you."

"I…"

"You *know* we can fight. That's all you think predators do, right? Sit back and let us kill these bastards. Now we're moving in, before the drones get set up. Let's go, alright?"

"Fine. This is very temporary!"

"I sure hope so," Marcel grumbled. "I wouldn't want those guys watching our backs."

The human ships pushed further into the system, carving out a path for their herbivore allies to follow. Most species would've turned back, with such severe adversity out of the gate. As everyone knew, the Terrans weren't "most species." The Kolshians were rallying more ships to our locale; the worst of the battle was yet to come. I gripped my harness tightly, and prepared for the duel of titans that was about to play out.

These were the opening shots of a clash with humanity's toughest opponent yet.

Chapter 115

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: January 14, 2137

Seven thousand human ships moved in a wide arc, closing in on the Kolshian drones. Manned enemy vessels were also hooking into the fray; the larger frames and bridge structures gave away which ones were traditional craft. These foes were unafraid, perhaps because their commanders were part of the conspiracy. Commonwealth automatons that were struck by our missiles had gotten their shields back up, while we dawdled rallying the Duerten.

The carrier Marcel and I were on veered to the flank, giving a wide berth to the heart of the action. Terran fighters and cruisers, the ones that survived saving our frazzled allies, veered back to escort us. Other manned vessels were transporting more humans to different targets, with the bravest few popping into enemy ranks. The Kolshians preemptively had FTL disruptors up, having learned of the primates' jump into the Arxur's ranks at Sillis. Our boarders had to get up close to an enemy craft the old-fashioned way.

"Transport 8-A, you're en route to a civilian research station. There was a small team of human doctors there as well, studying the effects of Dossur plants on our physiology," a commander's voice growled through the shuttle's speakers. "We presume they are dead, since they weren't counted on any evac shuttles. However, your mission is to rescue any Dossur or humans you find on board. Watch your fire, three other boarding parties are working different sides of the station."

I winced to myself, not wanting to imagine what the Kolshians had done to innocent predators. If those victims had survived for three weeks, that might be worse than a quick death; the Federation didn't shy away from starving or torturing anything with forward-facing eyes. Nikonus had denounced Sovlin's actions during Noah's speech, but talk was cheap. There was no telling what a liar like him would actually do.

Marcel's eyes darkened. "When I signed up for the exchange program, I was so excited about extraterrestrial life. Peacekeepers keep peace; we're weren't supposed to be slaughtering aliens who

tortured us. I'm glad I have you, Slanek, else I might think all Feds were murderous."

"We're not Federation," I snapped immediately. "We left them, and we don't want to be associated with them. They called us weak for centuries. They are lying, deceiving fucks."

"Sorry. I guess I meant every species in the Federation, at the time of our arrival on the galactic scene. Regardless, I think we all know whatever happened to those humans wasn't good."

"Let's hope we don't get the details spelled out. It makes my blood boil, how they treat your kind like animals! Looking back, I don't know how I ever thought you were dangerous."

"Don't discount us now. We *are* dangerous, just not to our friends!"

The transport began powering up, and I reminded myself where the oxygen masks were in case of a depressurization. My bulletproof vest was tailored to the Venlil form, along with a small personal shielding system; it was supposed to mitigate environmental hazards, such as radiation or energy projectiles. I also had a customizable helmet, fitted with a camera for command review. The Terrans had poured everything into their research and development, after Earth.

I still remember sitting in that naval headquarters, and seeing city after city fall on the broadcasts. It wasn't that long ago. Those poor, poor humans, who begged for peace to the moment the first bomb dropped…

Despite the fact that I was on edge from the residual memories, a reminder of how my empathetic hunters would be eradicated without remorse jolted me into combat readiness. The binocular eyes around me were icy with determination, and I could see the soldiers flipping the killing switch in real time. Humans wouldn't take kindly to their pack members being slaughtered en masse. The sooner we could reach the station, the better.

It was possible for me to watch the viewport in my periphery; I no longer needed blinders for deployments. The space battle was ongoing in full-force, with both sides hurling shield-breaking missiles at each other. UN shielding flickered out, though the predators were prepared for that eventuality. They dispensed platforms in front of them, like laying out a red carpet.

Walls materialized in front of the ships, enough to cover the front

line's full height from various angles. The Kolshians found their plasma munitions pummeling hardy fortifications; it was difficult to land any strikes against the humans. The primates procured layers of defenses, which the enemy would need to strip away for a kill. I'd seen Terran-crafted weapons, but this was the first defensive innovation they'd shown off.

The Duerten were revitalized, chipping in with tepid shots and missiles. The humans, leading the charge, chucked a new wave of nanodrones at the Kolshians. The enemy saw the miniatures coming this time, but didn't have an answer to stop their approach. It was like trying to shoot an enemy perched atop a speeding car, kilometers away. No targeting system or algorithm was programmed for that; AI adaptiveness couldn't drum up a solution that swiftly.

Marcel grinned at the viewport. "Kolshian fleet? We're here to talk to you about your car's extended warranty."

Explosions rocked the enemy line at the end of his sentence, and gruff cackles rippled across our transport. I found myself laughing at this destruction alongside the predators, which was further proof of my unwell mind. The nanodrones had skirted Kolshian shells, and turned these opponents into debris shards, set adrift by an engine eruption. The Terran fleet was cozy and untouchable behind their physical barriers, as hundreds of adversaries were downed.

With shields down across the board, it was the humans who were dishing out massive damage and protecting their own. The Kolshian drones were commanded to retreat, realizing that they needed to invite us deeper into Mileau's system. Hunkering down was dandy, if we could afford to wait for the opponent to come to us. However, the United Nations needed to advance on targets, not camp out in the fringes.

The Terrans disassembled the walls, which autonomously retracted into ship bays. They pursued the retreating Kolshians with zeal, perhaps incensed, as I was, by the prospect of captive humans. The Duerten Shield moseyed along, with sporadic bursts of fire coming from their ranks. All they seemed to add was the illusion of depth; it was the predators forging ahead.

There's only one species that can challenge the Kolshians at all. But the humans will have to claw for every inch, and there'll be a fight on the

ground too. We can't pull a full frontal assault with civilians to rescue.

Our carrier had separated from the larger fleet, and the research station was within view. The hangar bay doors lowered at a glacial pace, opening up the behemoth's belly to the effervescent stars. A piston brought the shuttle back, before propelling us forward with sudden momentum. My stomach lurched, and I leaned against my human for stability.

The time for occupying myself with the larger battle had expired. We had been released, alongside a handful of other transports, toward the conquered Dossur habitat. Kolshian warships prowled around the station, which looked like a series of rings stacked atop each other. These foes were more traditional enemy craft, designed to cart soldiers to and fro. They spotted our vector, and rushed out to intercept us.

Terran fighters pulled away from our ride's side, and moved to greet the interceptors. Their job was to ensure we were unimpeded in transit; I was well aware that our transport could succumb to a single shot that slipped through. Every life onboard hinged on how well our allies could keep us out of the fight, until we arrived at the station.

"So Slanek, what sort of training do you get to become a Venlil Space Corps pilot?" Marcel sensed my nerves at the incoming enemies, who were well-equipped to take out a ship like ours. The human was kind to distract me from the precarious flight, but his topic choice was touchy. "Every time I asked you in the exchange program, you said you didn't want to talk about war. So I quit asking."

I pinned my ears back. "You clearly didn't quit asking. Take a hint. Mostly, they just taught us how to operate the ship, and how to search for the fastest route to flee."

"I…your military training taught you how to flee? In hindsight, it's obvious the Federation was damn well trying to lose."

"They told us we couldn't beat the grays. Truth was, the Kolshians could've swooped in the whole time. If I hadn't met humans, I'd never have realized any of it. I'd still be a scared little Venlil, sniveling at the first sign of peril."

Maybe I was happier then, though I wouldn't trade meeting Marcel for

the world. What I wouldn't give to unlearn how readily I can kill…

"What's wrong?" my human asked, blinking with concern. "You haven't been yourself since we came back from Sillis. You weren't yourself even before the grays landed there."

I snapped my head back, like he slapped me. "Must you pry at every waking hour? Maybe I just don't want to talk *all the time*! We're in a fucking battle."

Marcel clammed up, a taut grimace on his face. I suppose that was the wrong thing to say, when I did want his concern and attention. Part of me wanted to confess how tormented I'd felt, and admit the decline in my day-to-day stability. This was the wrong time for Slanek to go crying to his human, though; if I'd made it through all the battles in the past, I could keep it together for one more fray.

I drew a ragged breath, and turned my focus to the fighters warding off the Kolshians. Our transport twirled out of the way, as a plasma beam slipped off in our direction. We were ready to evade on a moment's notice, despite how it sloshed the soldier passengers around. I couldn't wait to set my feet on solid ground; it was terrifying to be caged, as weapons sizzled around us.

The carrier from which we came loomed behind us with a watchful eye. It boasted hearty munitions and a treasure trove of missiles, and it combined a whirlwind of those items against enemy ships. Drones spilled from a separate hangar in its belly; these robots expanded upon the nimbleness of narrow fighters. Faced with multiple new threats, the Kolshians diverted attention to the source, easing the pressure off us.

Our transport seized the opportunity, refusing to slow down until it was absolutely necessary to breach the station. The humans weren't foolish enough to enter through an actual airlock; according to a commander who briefed us, the Kolshians were smart enough to have those locked down tighter than "Fort Knox." I wasn't sure what that meant, but I understood the gist of it. Taking the path of maximum resistance wasn't my preferred action.

I tapped my tail against Marcel's wrist, and he pushed it away. "Hey, I'm sorry for snapping. I'm just under a lot of stress…and I know you are too, so it was wrong. You know I love our chats. That subject struck a nerve, that's all."

“Don’t sweat it,” the human sighed. “I won’t make the same mistake, giving you the silent treatment going into combat, again. I am just worried about you.”

“No need to worry, my brother. So I can put my tail back?”

“Fat chance, Salt Monster. We’re touching down in a minute; we need to be ready.”

“I am ready—to shove the next can of Pringles I get all the way up your ass.”

“Aw, listen, he’s catching on to our lingo, guys! We’re truly corrupting the Venlil.”

Our transport bore down on the Dossur station, and pulled up alongside a maintenance shaft. Arcs of white trailed behind us, as Kolshian guardians and human fighters were taking significant casualties. The UN carrier was still kicking, but the gaping holes in its hull suggested it’d seen better days. It wasn’t clear who the localized victor would be, but that wasn’t our concern. We had to assume the Terrans would reclaim this station, and focus on retaking it from the ground.

The main UN fleet seems to be progressing as well, and the Duerten have stopped the bleeding from their ranks. The worst resistance is by Mileau though; we’re lucky to be assigned to a small station.

The transport lurched, as it deployed grappling hooks to the structure. Human soldiers chattered about it being “like pirates”; I tilted my head in confusion, as I received a translation error. There was another phrase to ask Marcel in my spare time. Perhaps these “pirates” were human rescuers who saved lost ships? As someone who’d learned their real side, I wasn’t going to assume it was something predatory this time.

We rose from our seated positions, and arrayed by the exit to bridge the gap. The Terrans had affixed an artificial tunnel to the station, ensuring our travel point was oxygenated. It also ensured that the target’s atmosphere didn’t leak into the great beyond. For humans, blasting through the structure’s metal was a simple task, taking a matter of seconds. With mathematical precision, we were skulking into occupied territory.

Panic threatened to swallow me, but it wasn’t the mindless fear of my instincts. It was an onslaught of terrible sights, jumbled together

from past battles. I took a series of deep breaths, as Sara and her team taught me to do in the instinct suppression program. Oddly enough, rather than my emotions encouraging me to flee, it felt like I was seconds away from slipping into combat mode.

“There were human and Dossur civilians here,” I soothed myself. “It’ll all make sense once you’re killing the Kolshians that did this.”

You want the bastards to suffer, Slanek. And you certainly don’t want Marcel thinking of you as a liability again, like he would if he knew you were in this rut.

Human soldiers rolled grenades through the entrance, before scurrying forward with weapon muzzles alight. My red-haired predator wore a steely expression, as we poured out through the breaching tunnel. I willed my own legs to move, and clung to the orderly formation. Despite sticking out like a rotting vegetable, as the only Venlil, our unit banding together rendered me part of the pack. The Kolshians were our prey, vermin that needed to be cleansed from the station.

We cleared the structural opening, and gunfire assailed the pack leaders. I hustled into the maintenance shaft, and pointed my weapon. My claw was on the trigger before I could command myself to do so. Bullets from my firearm cleared the distance, and the deadly projectiles struck true on a veteran Kolshian.

Violet fluids splattered behind the enemy’s head; there was no question that had been my kill. I hoped to feel some remorse, but I sensed only the chaos of the situation. Crimson blood spurted from one Terran’s shoulder, and another primate slumped to the ground across from me. Marcel was moving to cover, hazel eyes wired and determined. We had expected to take casualties, with this much resistance present.

As the humans exchanged fire with the Kolshians, I issued a silent plea to the universe for our success. Every station and stretch of land within Mileau’s desecrated vicinity would be an uphill battle to reclaim. If the predators didn’t deal numerous defeats to the Federation today, our chances in the overarching war looked significantly less optimistic.

Chapter 116

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: January 14, 2137

Human and Kolshian casualties escalated, as the firefight raged on in the tight corridor. The enemy had shifted their tentacled forms behind cover, and their response was measured. I was impressed with their levelheadedness under the circumstances. My claws popped off covering shots, while Marcel pried a panel open, with his bare fingers, for us to duck behind.

It was shabby cover, but it was better than nothing. The two of us awkwardly situated our rifles, and peppered the Kolshians with fire. Our foes had found a robust set of tanks and storage containers to crowd behind, daring humans to charge straight into a stream of bullets. UN transports had breached in other areas of the station too; at least, that would discourage the enemy from summoning backup to one locale. Even with just the forces present, I wasn't sure how the predators could flush our opponents from their resilient fortifications.

"Fucking hell, Slanek!" Marcel adjusted his helmet; his eyes darted from side to side, searching for a strategy. "There's only one way into the living areas of the station, and it's through them."

I found a careless indigo leg poking out behind cover, and steadied my aim with a cue to Marcel. My bullet zipped toward its mark, tearing through the flabby flesh. A howl of pain could be faintly heard through the deafening exchange of gunfire, and the Kolshian's leg buckled. The human was ready to finish my kill, when the hobbled enemy toppled into the open. My best friend placed a clean shot through their brain as soon as they hit the floor.

I drew some ragged gasps. "There's a dozen of them, give or take, and I don't think grenades'll do much here, in all that clutter. We just gotta keep shooting them."

The predator popped off a series of shots, making sure to keep his head below the ajar panel. Our impromptu cover was impairing our sightlines a bit, though in this case, I was sure the binocular eyes helped him focus on a narrow range of vision. Marcel stole peeks at the areas the Kolshians hunkered down in, risking the elevated

sightlines for a few seconds. A wicked smile crossed his face, and that murderous delight sent a chill down my spine.

"What if we didn't shoot *them*?" the human asked.

I watched in confused silence, as Marcel's aim crept away from the soldiers. I couldn't tell what he was looking at; there was little more than clutter and pipes in the shaft. He closed one binocular eye, and inhaled through his stomach for several seconds. It was easy to picture him as a hunter crouched in the grass, checking that his aim was true.

His finger hooked around the trigger, and as a result, a small flame appeared from a stout tank. It seemed to be the standard emergency oxygen supply, which could be used to fill spacesuits in the event of an emergency or required maintenance. The flaming tank violently failed, creating a chain of high-pressure flames from others nearby. Screams came from the sheltering Kolshians, and a series of explosions sounded down the tunnel.

The Kolshians flailed about from within the blazes; they were easy targets for the predators to mop up. Human soldiers backed their wounded deeper into the tunnel, ensuring that they were clear of the blasts. A handful of our troops had the good sense to deploy fire retardant measures, and managed to quell the blazes after several minutes. The station's built-in fire suppression systems helped, with overhead sprinklers drenching us. Marcel pressed two gloved fingers to his forehead, before snapping them down with a sly grin.

Why engage in a tough gunfight with unclear results, when you can incinerate the enemy? Humans…so observant, under extreme stress. That's my best friend there!

I absorbed the shouted reports being passed around, and took the cue to move forward. We'd cleared the path into the living areas with an unusual tactic; that meant we could discover what happened to the station's inhabitants, and what the Kolshians were up to. It was possible that we'd encounter mangled human corpses. Sympathy swelled in my chest for the civilian Terrans trapped here, trying to protect their friends.

"Stay alert, Slanek," Marcel murmured. "These are conniving fuckers; I wouldn't put traps, or even a dead man's switch, past them. If they can't have these Dossur, they might decide nobody can."

I flicked my ears. “Killing a bunch of your kind might be a worthy sacrifice to them, using civilians as bait. I understand the risks.”

The Terrans unfastened the locking mechanisms on the trapdoor out of the service shaft, and we climbed out of the ceiling hatch in a hurry. There was a ladder that could be taken, but waiting for each person to descend the rungs would waste time. I hopped down after Marcel, rolling the rough landing on the metal floor. Several predator heads whipped around, checking for signs of enemy engagement; leaders spread their men in anticipation of hostile contact.

Kolshian footsteps hurried down the narrow hallway, no doubt having heard the thuds of heavy primates’ boots landing. We capitalized on the few seconds to ready ourselves, and a dozen guns sang out to mow the hostiles down with prejudice. The enemy didn’t even have a chance to employ their own weapons; it was a mere four security guards, versus a sizable group of humans.

I kept my head low, as we jogged through the hallway. A series of empty rooms greeted us; this area wasn’t bustling with activity. Kolshian reinforcements weren’t hustling to our sector, after how quickly we picked apart their entrenched defenses. So far, the battle was going as well as could be expected. We needed to locate some civilians, and start to evac victims, while our comrades kept the pressure on in other compartments.

“Why don’t we check the med bay?” I shouted. “That’s a logical place to start for reeducation.”

Just like that Takkan doctor, Zarn, that wanted to whisk me off.

A human leader narrowed his eyes. “Not a bad idea, Vennie. How do we locate the medical areas?”

“This seems to be the mess halls, game rooms, lounges, and so on. If it’s a standard design, we’re adjacent to the personal quarters now,” I explained. “Work stuff will likely be closer to the center, with the medical areas having a separate wing. There should be signs of a raised paw pad—the doctor symbol, like your red cross.”

“Very well. Lead the way, since you seem to know the ins and outs.”

I scampered to the front of the pack, with hesitancy; it was a bit unnerving to feel the predators tailing me, and to know their guns

were at my back. My own weapon was ready in my grip, as I turned left down the hall. My eyes were peeled for any sign of the doctor's symbol or a directory. It took minutes walking past several spaces, devoid of any souls, to encounter a paw pad sign.

I tossed my head, indicating for the Terrans to follow down the dimly-lit corridor. The silence was eerie, so I strained my ears for any sign of noise. The sounds of pained screams, the unmistakable wail of a human, stopped me dead in my tracks. I could detect the noise ahead, though the Terran soldiers had yet to catch on.

"Do you hear that?" I hissed. "Screams."

Our senior enlisted leader turned his ear, before his eyes widened. "Double time! Move it, people. Split up if needed; clear every room of civilians, yesterday!"

The predators' long legs left me in the dust, as they hoofed it in the direction of their people. With the agonized cries to attract them, the guidance of a Venlil was no longer needed. I sprinted as quickly as I could, but Marcel scooped me up in his arms before I got far. My human rushed in the noise's direction, and set me down once we reached the labs.

His hazel eyes scanned for rooms that hadn't been cleared, and he pointed to a small lab. The lights could be seen flicking off from under the door, giving away that someone was in there. It wasn't clear if it was an enemy, but the humans and the Dossur should be pleading for rescue, not hiding. Marcel pressed his shoulder against the wall, and at his signal, I kicked the door open for him.

I filtered in behind the muscular predator, who was bellowing commands in a bone-chilling tone to get on the ground. Two Kolshians dismounted stools on Marcel's orders, though without the fear befitting someone's first encounter with an enraged human. Microscopes sat abandoned on the counters, with cell slides up for examination. These seemed like unarmed scientists; their raised tentacles suggested they were trying to surrender.

After the false surrender at the Tilfish extermination office, I was wary of these aliens. However, the Kolshians were compliant in sprawling out on the ground. Marcel carried only a single pair of handcuffs, and cursed to himself. He ordered me to watch one, as he snapped plastic bands around the other's arms. The scientists didn't try any dirty tricks, looking a little amused by the human's

unwillingness to kill them.

I'm anything but amused. Why is Marcel taking prisoners, when they clearly deserve death?

Marcel threw an occasional glance at the handcuffed enemy, until he found a roll of tape lying around. He wrapped it around the second prisoner's arms, and seemed dissatisfied with the level of restraints. His rosy lips pressed together, weighing his options. I was weary of him showing mercy to those who didn't deserve it, Sovlin being the most egregious example.

"Alright, Slanek. We're gonna take these fuckers for questioning." The red-haired Terran wiped perspiration from his brow, and hoisted the cuffed Kolshian to her feet. "Keep an eye on that one until I return. I'll be back quick as I can, after handing this jackass off to our team."

Marcel hustled out of the room with a prisoner in tow. I bit back my disdain, keeping my gun focused on the Kolshian. If this scientist wanted to tempt me to shoot them, I was happy to oblige. From the sound of the screams I'd heard, it was a safe assumption this outfit was responsible for torturing humans. My contemptful gaze studied the tape on the lavender tentacles, and the thing dared to ask me a question.

"Do you have a name, Venlil?" the Kolshian queried.

Anger caused my grip on the gun to tighten. "Yes, but you don't get to use it."

"My name is Navarus. You want to question me on what we did here? Oh, I'd love to spell it all out for you and any of those ugly-eyed freaks. We can take away everything that makes them unique…that makes them predators, in a flash."

"What did you do?! You fucking monster!"

"Ah, it's funny. You depress their central nervous systems, they grow sleepy and confused. They barely even know who they are; good-bye violent demons. We only tried that on twenty-five percent of the group, to measure the effects of the cure with and without it. A control group is scientific."

"*The* cure? You didn't."

Navarus bared his teeth with aggression, a clear gesture of hostility

compared to humanity's snarl. He nodded his head toward a set of computer monitors, which showed Terrans languishing in small rooms. It was easy to tell which ones were drugged out of their minds; others were presenting with physical symptoms. Watching him revel in using predator civilians for his experiments made my blood boil. What right did they have to erase their dietary… leanings?

I can't say I like the predators tearing into a pound of flesh, but they would do this to people like Tyler. Even after he brought Sovlin on our rescue, I don't think he deserves to be experimented on, without any regard for side effects or discomfort.

I couldn't imagine humanity without their fervor, reduced to little more than prey. This was what would've happened to Earth, if the Kolshians realized centuries ago that the primates could be converted. The only solace was that the scientists hadn't gone after their eyes, or inflicted significant wounds. More fury threatened to overtake me, as I began to wonder what they planned to use this research for.

"Some of them are vomiting, but we're inclined to believe it's not from the cure," Navarus continued. "It's mainly from the ones on the higher doses of the depressants. And these humans react much more positively to herbivory than the prideful Arxur, which was surprising. Our previous hypothesis was that predators are too arrogant to sustain themselves on leaves."

I swished my tail in indignation. "Some of them *choose* to only eat leaves! You know nothing about humans, and you treat them like animals."

"Yes, it might be worth keeping a few around, with significant modifications. Something salvageable. We confirmed that the cure prohibits them from flesh-eating, so now, they don't have the option to eat living creatures."

"How did you confirm that?!"

"Ah, we fed one of them its own rations. Was hysterical, watching it asphyxiate and turn all red. We're all born into the government caste, kept away from broader society, working in secret…wasn't anything I chose. But getting to make a predator die by its own cruelty, for the good of sapient life? Had I a choice, I would've chosen this work for that alone."

Ringing surfaced in my ears, and fury made it difficult to string thoughts together. This Kolshian deserved to die, after bragging about genetically modifying, drugging, and killing human civilians. This was the species that I lived among on Earth, and fought battles alongside. Anyone who would condemn them to be “cured” deserved to be cured of their living status.

I was tired of letting monsters, who sought Terran suffering with glee, live and receive luxurious rights. My rifle raised, and I jammed the barrel against Navarus’ temple. The Kolshian had the audacity to laugh in my face; all I could think was how gratifying it would be to end his existence. A growl rumbled in my throat, and the predatory nature of that cue surprised me.

“Go ahead! Do it,” the enemy scientist barked. “You don’t have it in you.”

I pressed the gun deeper into his…no, its skull. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course I am. You Venlil are the weakest species in the galaxy. You couldn’t stand up for yourselves against a Dossur using their whiskers as a knife! Just look how scared—”

I tugged the trigger in a swift motion, putting an end to the Kolshian’s condescending speech. The scientist’s brains were expelled from its skull, and blood splattered onto my fur. I stared in cold silence as the body slumped to the floor.

Chapter 117

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: January 14, 2137

My paws were rooted to the floor, as I cast a blank stare at Navarus' corpse. Bootsteps pounded behind me, and without turning around, I knew it was Marcel racing back after hearing gunshots. An audible gasp came from my human, who skidded to a halt. He could see me standing in close range of the dead Kolshian, firearm in paw. The predator froze in shock, before rushing up to me in a panic.

Marcel's hands latched onto my shoulders. "What did you do? The fuck have you done?!"

The red-haired Terran had handed the first prisoner off to the team, but the discovery that he'd be unable to collect the second Kolshian left him in an aggravated state. My friend couldn't restrain his emotions, baring his canines inches from my face. I could see his cheek muscles contorting it in grotesque ways, and his scars stretched in new patterns. I'd never seen such clear disgust in his pupils, not even during our predator disease saga.

Panic rose in my chest, as I feared that Marcel would disown me for this action. He leaned back, and shook his head in mute horror. My orders had been to watch the Kolshian prisoner for a few minutes; I knew I shouldn't have pulled the trigger. Admitting that I wanted Navarus dead for his cruel taunts wasn't an option, though I didn't regret killing that monster.

Marcel can't leave me. He's my best friend…I can't have him thinking I'm some predator-diseased killer.

Genuine tears rolled down my furry cheeks, which caused the human to pause in his reaction. I could see a twinge of sympathy cause his lips to curve downward; his natural response was to comfort me. The mental gears turned enough to realize that I could use this, and paint a story which justified my deeds. If part of him believed I was a weak, scared liability, then this decision could be played off as fear.

Marcel had to believe I didn't mean to kill the prisoner.

"I'm s-sorry. He started t-trying to stand up, and I p-panicked!" I put

on my most despairing expression, and recoiled from the corpse as though horrified. The stutter was easy to let slip through, since I was nervous about the human's rejection. "My gun was on him, and then he m-moved toward me…it was reflex…"

"The Kolshian was tied up *with tape!* He's still kneeling."

"I k-know, but I wasn't thinking. He moved his head s-suddenly, and I don't know what h-happened. Forgive me, please! I need you…"

I chastised myself to drop the gun, and flung myself at the predator in desperation. My arms wrapped around his thick body, and I sobbed into his vest. The human felt warm and strong, even as I absorbed his shuddering inhales. Without seeing where his binocular gaze was pointed, I knew his eyes were on my body.

Marcel hesitated, before a gloved hand gently kneaded my scruff. "It's okay. We'll deal with it. We'll figure this out and clean this up, huh? You made a mistake."

"D-don't hate me," I pleaded. "I just want to help you…"

"I could never hate you, Slanek. Shooting an unarmed prisoner is a horrible thing to do, but I wasn't here to protect you. We shouldn't have trusted a Venlil to act as an independent soldier…it's not your fault, but you're clearly not past your instincts. Let me think."

The outright accusation that I couldn't carry myself on the battlefield stung. I suppose it was better for Marcel to believe that I was a panicky animal, rather than an enraged Venlil who played executioner. Listening to the way Navarus spoke about humans and goaded me on, the trigger pull was irresistible. My best friend would never understand, because he didn't think killing should be enjoyable.

Once, or if, I talk my way out of this, the humans need to know about the cure work. Maybe that would make him just as angry, and then, I can confess the truth.

Marcel pulled away from our embrace, and offered a taut smile. His reddish eyebrows soared up into his forehead, as if an idea occurred to him. He unclipped his holopad from his war belt, before tapping away with his slim fingers. I looked at my friend with hopeful eyes, praying he could sweep this all under the rug.

"What are you doing?" I croaked.

The predator's gaze jerked up from the pad. "I'm searching through the video archives. It all happened like you said, so in case this comes back up, we should retrieve the footage that exonerates you. I'm downloading a clip of the last ten minutes from your point of view."

My heart sank into my chest. The helmet rested upon my head like a rock, as I recalled the tiny camera on its side. It had recorded the entirety of my interaction with the Kolshian, including how I gunned it down at point-blank range. Maybe there was a chance I could access the server, and delete the footage before Marcel finished downloading it? If it was for command review, I doubted I had permissions to do that regardless.

I scrambled over to his side, throwing my paws around his elbow. "What?! D-don't…why w-would you look at that? I feel awful. I don't want to look at it again!"

"You don't have to review it, buddy. I can handle it…it won't take me that long." Marcel squinted at the download progress bar, which was counting down my impending doom. "I doubt the UN or the Venlil Republic would have you prosecuted for an instinctual accident, knowing your stampede policy. Just in case, we should have something for a legal defense."

The holopad chimed, indicating that the download was finished. The human tapped the video, and I screeched with blind panic. My outstretched paws dove toward the holopad, which the predator snapped above his head on reflex. I jumped as high as my crooked legs would allow, trying to grab the object. However, Marcel was holding it well out of my reach, and my paws swatted empty air.

The Terran officer's jawline tightened, and suspicion flashed in his hazel eyes. He used his back to shield the holopad from me, huddling over it with singular focus. The audio must be going straight to his implant, but the Kolshian's dialogue didn't affect his feelings. He swiveled around, with an unmistakable look of concentrated loathing.

"You lied to me. You tried to make me feel *sorry* for you!" he roared.

"M-Marc…"

"NO! Save it. I've heard enough of your spineless deflections."

The human cleared the ground to the body with a handful of strides, anger charging his motions. Marcel stooped down, picking up the gun I'd discarded. His binocular eyes bore into mine, as he stared straight at my horizontal pupils. He flung the firearm at my chest, and curled his lip in disdain. I'd never seen him this callous and resentful, not even on Sillis.

"Carry your *murder* weapon like a badge of honor. When we get out of it, I'm making sure you never touch one again," the predator hissed.

I flicked my ears. "Listen! The Kolshians are c-curing humans."

"We'll handle it. You don't need to worry about it anymore."

"I can h-help! I…just made a mistake!"

"That was no mistake; it was a calculated execution. You knew it was wrong, or you wouldn't have covered it up. God, I can't believe I fucking trusted you. I thought we were brothers…I let you live in my house with my fiancé and my daughter! I don't know what's wrong with you, but you're unhinged."

"You're being an ass…"

"I'm being an ass?! Shut the fuck up, and move out. You're going to help escort some civilians back to the shuttle, and then you're going to stay there 'til we return. If you don't like that, I'll be delighted to throw you in the brig myself."

Marcel barely seemed to be corralling his temper, and he stomped off down the hallway. I trudged after the human with a defeated posture, tucking my tail between my legs. The dead Kolshian's eyes gave the appearance of watching me, as they were stuck open for all eternity. The hurt that I felt was crushing, after the way my best friend just treated me.

Did I just ruin our friendship? No, he's not being fair! Navarus fucking deserved to die, and I shouldn't have to dance around Marcel's precious morals.

"I knew you would act this way!" I sprinted up to the human's side, and he quickened his pace to stay ahead of me. "You let everyone have mercy, from Sovlin to…fuck, you probably think that getting life in prison was enough for Kalsim. You made me apologize to the same man that tormented us. What kind of shitty friend does that?"

Marcel said nothing, but his fingers tightened around the gun. His anger was so heavy that I could feel the tension infecting the air.

"ANSWER ME! Every time we go off to war, you have to rescue someone from the species that fucking harmed us," I continued. "Nulia, Virnt and Birla, and now these Kolshian assholes. You don't have the spine to stand up for yourself, or enforce any kind of punishment on anyone. It's your fault that I felt like I had to lie!"

The human's skin was turning red from fury. "You execute a prisoner, and it's my fault?! You're trying to spin this on me now?"

"The Kolshian tortured your civilians, and called it *science*. They drugged them so much that they puked, genetically modded them. I don't fucking regret it, I'd do it again. Navarus deserved to die; shit, he got off easy."

"Maybe he did deserve to die, but that's not your decision to make! We can't question a dead guy. Either everyone gets rights, or nobody does. His testimony could have swung more allies to our side. What you did is unacceptable, and I don't even know who the fuck you are anymore."

"Neither do I. You humans flipped on my predator switch, and I can't undo that. You did this. All I think about anymore is war and death."

Marcel clammed up once more, plodding along with brooding bootsteps. His eyes darted toward me for a brief moment, and I could see that our quarrel was distracting him. We reached a central area of the medbay, where UN soldiers were gathering. My posture was stiff, as I worried that my friend would declare my actions to the first commander he saw. However, the vegetarian seemed intent on getting out of here before reporting me.

Sickly humans with glassy eyes were being tended to by medics; their gaunt frames suggested they'd been underfed for the duration of their stay. The Kolshians either didn't know or didn't care about the predators' caloric needs. Dossur rescues observed the dazed predators with concern, and Terran soldiers were determining how to move the rodents. Speed was key to safety, and the galaxy's most diminutive race wasn't covering ground quickly.

It seems like it was very easy to get through to the medical lab. I expected more resistance in this area, but all the Kolshians here are

unarmed…

Perhaps that realization jinxed us; the med-bay compartment doors slammed shut, as they would in a depressurization. I could hear an air conditioning unit kick on, as a hearty gust of ventilation poured down the shaft. Human soldiers rushed to the compartment doors, trying to pry them open. Were the Kolshians going to poison us? The enemy had waited until multiple units made it to the civilians before locking us in here.

The gasses that were filtering in felt noxious, but the predators made quick work of busting out. They bypassed the locking mechanism through brute force, using charges to blast down the door. I grabbed Marcel's wrist, and guided the coughing redhead out to the hallway. He dropped to his knees, gasping in the fresh air.

"What…was that?" my friend choked.

"Fucking hell." Our unit commander staggered out of the medbay, and exchanged a few words with our medics. "Listen up! Those of you with masks, get back and look for anybody left in the gas—our smaller friends won't survive long. Get going! The rest of you, post security; they might try to hit us while we're reeling. I want a team to find where that gas came from ASAP! Break!"

I helped my red-haired predator up, and he pushed himself away from me. The young officer volunteered his boarding party for the search without hesitation. A disoriented Marcel followed the rest of his team, still shaking off the unknown substance he'd inhaled. The soldiers had located a map of the ship's layout, and got a rescued Dossur read it out to them. We navigated through the ship tunnels; I kept myself alert for more traps.

The Terrans busted down the door to a supply closet, not even checking if it was locked or not. There was evidence that Kolshians had been present recently, but they cleared out in a hurry after their stunt. We checked the supply air ductwork, which had a canister plugged into it. The predators' senior leader ran a visual translator over items left on the duct, and the complexion diminished from his face.

"Chief? Is everything alright?" I asked.

The human senior's eyes turned toward me. "It seems the Kolshians

fed us a sleeping gas, but we weren't exposed long enough for it to do anything other than make us woozy. However, son, they laced it with something else too. Everyone *remain calm*; I'm going to inform command that we need a quarantine for all humans on this station."

Marcel's eyes widened. "Why, Chief? Are we in danger?"

"Sir, these empty vials here say, 'The Cure.' There's only one thing that can mean in my eyes. I believe we just got dosed on their anti-carnivore dust, by air transmission. We have to assume the worst. Sir: we're all vegetarians, now, by threat of death. Let's drum up diet plans by the end of the day. Need green rations shipped to us pronto; you're our expert."

Even among seasoned Terran soldiers, that admission was enough to spark some panicked chattering, while the senior leader phoned it in to command. I studied Marcel with worried eyes. No matter what he thought about me, I wanted only the best for him. My human didn't deserve to have genetic modifications forced upon him. Though he was vegetarian, that should be a choice for him to make of his own volition. There could also be additional consequences, and I wasn't sure if it was transmissible to others of his kind.

Does this mean that the Kolshian Commonwealth has decided to try to "cure" the primates, rather than eradicate them?

It wasn't clear if whatever was tailored to the humans during these experiments worked on me, but I'd gotten the pathogen into my lungs as well. The Battle of Mileau was raging on outside these walls, and the Kolshians had sprung a dastardly trap on the Terrans here, who wandered in to rescue innocents. We needed to relay a warning to any other UN forces retaking ground encampments, to beware of potential biohazards.

Containing the exposure to just us was crucial; I wished that I could've saved Marcel from breathing that in. All I could hope now was that the cure wouldn't have any unexpected effects on the humans exposed to it here; unfortunately, one possible avenue for reversal was reduced to brain matter in my fur.

Chapter 118

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 14, 2137

The promise of food was the main selling point for my rebellion. After going hungry for the entirety of their lives, many Arxur troops were willing to heed my call with the promise of never missing a meal again. Betterment failed in that imperative, and merely pointing out the illogical nature of our raids proved that they never intended to deliver. My plan to utilize the Terran-gifted cattle and harvest non-sapients from untouched worlds was alluring.

I also offered sanctuary to defectives and defectors, reaching out through the secretive forums like the one I'd stumbled across before my fateful visit to Shaza's sector. It didn't matter which reason they opposed the Arxur Dominion for; checking all the bases was my top priority. There was outreach condemning the consumption of former omnivores, to those who believed races like the Gojids were truly sapient. We offered roles to those who didn't wish to fight, or sought civilian pursuits.

Like Jones says, just taking manpower away from Giznel and his people helps the war effort. The future of the Arxur shouldn't be only about soldiers; that's how we got here.

Lastly, on the internet, I planted the rumor that Betterment starved us intentionally, having kickstarted our suffering to start with, and allowed the people to circulate it. Initial recruitment had been more successful than I imagined; even non-defectives were weary of a lifelong war, and a strategy that was bound to ensure its continuance. 90% of my troops from the original sector, and around 65% of the ones from Shaza's old sector stayed under my control too.

Gaining allies beyond the UN's vague promise of future support was key. Rival Chief Hunters had yet to join me, although I wasn't giving up on that. If we could hang in the fight for long enough to validate our strength, then the self-centered brutes might decide we were worthy of support. They could rule their own sectors, solidifying all the power, without any oversight.

Manufacturing power was critical, since we needed to generate more ships. The humans sent us supplies, weapons, and small craft on the down low, though nothing that would draw attention or prove their involvement. Due to our need to grow our fleet, I encouraged anyone defecting to steal an armed transport. Playing to ego, mutinous captains who convinced some of their crew and brought a full warship were offered rank promotions.

"Hello, Isif." Lisa Reynolds looked up as I entered the daily briefing room, yawning in harmony with me. The two Terrans had done a decent job guarding me, and keeping me apprised of any intel the UN or my own people scrounged up. Jones must've coached them. "The Secretary-General is waiting on a secure line. He says he can offer something you want."

I lashed my tail with interest, hoping that meant the Terrans were lending military support early. As fun as it would be to keep Earth's leader waiting, having the aid of the UN establishment would be crucial. I grumbled for her and Olek to set up the call, and decided to push my status update on the rebellion to later in the day. There was also the matter of selecting some Arxur underlings for leadership roles; I would be interviewing a few presumed defectives on their candidacy soon.

It was a busy day, as there seemed to be no shortage of action. I'd selected an Arxur protégé, but he could wait for this call and the subsequent briefing to continue. Felra's whiskers twitched as she sat at the center of the table, where she could have the "best view in the house." The Dossur and I spent a lot of time conversing, though I was careful to keep her away from the Arxur general populace.

"What do you think Zhao wants to give you?" the ginger-and-white rodent asked. "A way to contact the Federation? You could make amends on behalf of your sect, *and* get them as allies."

A growl rumbled in my throat. "GRR! Harping on that again? That's what you want, not the humans. They're realists…except for Olek."

"Aw, c'mon, let up now! I hear that line from Lisa enough." Olek hunched over my holopad, a slight smile on his face. "I get it, I shouldn't have brought up my theories about *our* grays. It was an honest question."

"You know what else is an honest question? Why Isif shouldn't try to reach out to the Federation!" Felra pressed. "He says he's friends

with Tarva already."

I whipped my snout toward her. "We are not friends, in the slightest. That Venlil just doesn't want someone else commanding her sector, because I'm a lesser evil and I want change. She knows I partook in, even oversaw, unspeakable things. Would you like me to outline them for you, so you can know too?"

"I…I would. It must've been horrible to have to blend in with monsters, or die."

"Why can't you just act like a normal Dossur? Scream, cry, cower?"

Felra giggled as an answer, before wandering over to Lisa's spot. Peacekeeper Reynolds absent-mindedly petted the deranged rodent, who seemed to enjoy the human's nails pricking her spine. These were my advisors…leaf-licking aliens I lived with every day? Why did I tolerate them?! I marched up to Oleksiy, and hovered over him to encourage him to work faster.

The conspiracy theorist snapped his fingers. "All set. It's connecting now, so get ready, Isif."

"Got it. Your technical skills are appreciated."

"Hell yeah! Us human nerds have game. Best in the biz."

"Your self-complimenting assures me of your humility. The best do not have to declare they are the best, yes?"

"Don't have to, but I'm going to anyway. And hey, for what it's worth…I empathize with losing yourself, trying to blend in somewhere you don't belong. Venlil Prime was harsh, at first. If I hadn't met some special people at the right time, I might've forgot what I was fighting for. Not the same, but we're all shaped by our societies and our situations."

"That's a long-winded way of saying he gets it," Lisa chimed in. "From what we've seen of you, I think you're a softie."

I cast a glare in her direction. "I will rip off one of your limbs if you ever say that again!"

"Yeah, yeah, tough guy. Whatever you say."

I huffed in irritation, and stared down the camera with a bit more hostility than was needed. Secretary-General Zhao wouldn't understand my glare, but I couldn't have the humans calling me weak to my face. Wasn't "softie" an insult? The leader of the Arxur

rebellion was no scrawny runt, unable to enforce his will. That was equally as bad as considering me a monster!

If Zhao is calling to yank my chain, then I'll show him a real scowl. I need to be tougher with these humans, whether we're friends or not.

The Secretary-General blinked onto a video projector. "Hello. Thanks for taking my call, Isif; I know you're busy."

"Sure. Though I am busy, I can fit in time for Earth."

"Oh, I'll keep this short. I don't want to waste your time. But say, before I get down to the meat of the matter, do you mind filling me in on the latest war developments? Just want to make sure Jones isn't painting her own narrative."

Humoring Zhao wasn't what I planned to do first thing in the morning, but I had to keep him in my corner. Olek and Lisa watched as I started my speech, ready to chip in if needed. There were a lot of moving parts in the war, so summarizing it in concise fashion wouldn't be easy. However, I didn't want to squander any excess time rehashing the past.

"Well, I'm sure I'm telling you what you already know," I began diplomatically. "But we ceded a lot of our immobile infrastructure to the Dominion, since it's an easy target. We stay hidden and on the move, only surfacing to disrupt Arxur operations. Jones has been directing some rebels via internet channels, to pull some shenanigans from within Wriss' borders."

Zhao nodded. "Like we saw with what you've done, government sleeper agents are quite effective. How are you and your people faring against Betterment? I know Giznel is after your head."

"They've sent multiple search parties after us, while seeming to avoid human space. They do not wish to step on your toes, if I'm not mistaken? Anyhow, there have been, hrr, three-odd forays into my sectors this week. We do not intend to challenge them until the right opportunity presents itself."

"Excellent. And how are Bondarenko and Reynolds? Can they confirm to me that everything is good with their supplies and their treatment?"

Despite the fact that I had received non-sapient cattle post-Sillis, humans were distrustful of any Arxur-sourced meat. I would not dupe my guards, who were on cordial terms with me, into eating

sapient herbivore flesh. However, that wasn't a risk the United Nations or the duo themselves were willing to take. I understood on a logical level that the propaganda, should Terrans be documented enjoying a cut of Venlil filet, would be devastating.

Therefore, Olek and Lisa maintained their own food supply, and I made no efforts to take it away. My concern on that issue was more for my internet friend. Felra couldn't stomach watching us eat their lab-grown cuts or my animal-sourced meals, as we learned the hard way. The Dossur had tried, but there were some responses she couldn't manage. I was impressed with how quickly she'd grasped the concept of an obligate carnivore, for a Federation creature.

"Everything is fine, sir. We are safe and well, and missing Earth," Lisa said.

Zhao pursed his lips. "Glad to hear it. We'll leave another shipment in the same spot as always. Now, I'll cut to the chase, Isif; I called to offer you a gift. I only wanted to make sure your insurgency would last more than a few weeks, and that you wouldn't become a problematic faction in your own right."

"Your forces are ready to join us?" I queried.

"Not yet. I'm forwarding some blueprints over this link which I think you will find useful. There's clear instructions for any scientists you have."

My eyes narrowed, before I accepted the file transfer after a slight hesitation. I was certain that if the humans wanted to worm malware onto my system, they already had; I wouldn't even realize, with their sneakiness. The documents that popped onto my screen were explanations of how to create lab-grown meat. This was the ticket to growing substantial food, without needing any livestock!

I can't believe he's just giving this to me. Doesn't he hate us?

"I'm giving this to you free, as a thank you for all you've done for Earth," the Secretary-General continued. "Jones' one-sided ploys weren't fair to you. She told you that I would treat you like a pawn, but she accused me of what she herself is doing. That won't be my policy in our dealings. The United Nations is true to our friends, period."

Emotion swelled in my chest, realizing the implications this could have for starving billions. "Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General. I do

appreciate it deeply. Your human innovation will be put to good use."

"I have full faith in you, Isif. We're all rooting for you here. I'll let you go, but I wish you well in the coming days."

"You as well. Tear the Federation a new one."

The Secretary-General flashed his teeth. "Oh, we're working on it."

Zhao clicked off the call, and my pupils flickered over to the human guards. In the short duration that I had been chatting about lab-grown meat, Felra had rolled onto her back. Lisa was tickling the Dossur's stomach, which earned squeals from the rodent. I hissed in disgust, hoping that the Secretary-General hadn't heard this nonsense. I'd been so focused, that I was oblivious to anything happening in the background.

"Make yourselves presentable! Don't make me regret not letting the Kolshians have you, Felra," I snarled.

The Dossur flipped back to her paws. "That decision is made, and now you have to live with it. You…could try petting me too?"

"NO! Get that first Arxur grunt, now, Lisa, and sit *away* from Felra."

As the petting-happy primate darted off, Olek risked a glance at me. "What are we looking for? Do you want our advice?"

"If it's solicited. We're going to fill out my advisors; we need people who must be loyal to me, might be willing to tolerate the hunting-challenged species, and can also be influential. That's why I asked Felra to be here. How they react to her is a good indicator if they'll try to eat every herbivore they see."

The Dossur shivered. "I d-don't like this."

"Come here, Felra. I won't let them get anywhere near you."

Lisa returned, guiding a scrawny Arxur with an unimpressive muscle tone. I reacquainted myself with the facts of this one's circumstances, and emitted a contemplative hum. By all accounts, he was a weakling, who was a few slip-ups away from being executed by Betterment. He was captured by humans on the cradle, seeking defection to Earth. During the exchange of the Venlil cattle, he'd been returned with the other Arxur prisoners.

I'd observed this scrawny grunt, once he was transferred under my direct command. Jones' hint that he pleaded for Earth not to return

him, during our prior conference at Proxima Centauri, confirmed my suspicions that he *hated* Betterment. He had already wanted to leave, before Cilany's broadcast or my offer. I decided that an apparent defective would have undying loyalty, as long as I kept him fed. The Terrans hadn't protected him, so I doubted he'd run back to them.

The perfect second…assuming he's accepting of Felra and empathetic Arxur. A stretch for anyone raised on Wriss.

Felra scurried up atop my head, which earned a long stare from the newly-arrived Arxur defector. I donned my most threatening scowl, and bared my teeth. The scrawny grunt ducked his head submissively, allowing Lisa to show him to a chair. He waited with expectancy, a hint of anxiety showing in his fidgeting tail.

"Kaisal," I greeted the Arxur. "I've been watching you for a while."

Kaisal's gaze swept across the table, before returning to Felra. "Why is the Dossur animal here? Ah, are we eating together? Oh my, the stupid thing doesn't even realize. I am honored to join you, sir."

"You will treat the Dossur with the respect befitting any companion of mine. She is not food. She is a trusted, loyal…friend."

Realization flashed in Kaisal's dark eyes, and he jerked back in surprise. Admitting that an herbivore was a friend was a massive risk, with an unknown Arxur. It was as good as confessing that I felt empathy, and not only that, that I was defective enough to seek bonds like a social creature. His lip curled with momentary contempt, though he reeled himself back in. A sliver of appetite flashed in his eyes as well.

"I am surprised you got it to sit still," the grunt hissed, in a tone that was decidedly colder. "Those things do not view us as people. You must be very defective to convince it."

"Hsss, that's subjective, is it not? Defectiveness is not such a useless thing in war, as humans show. To feel empathy is to predict what your enemy will do…to strike as a unit. I think it is a good policy of the rebellion for *us both*, that we turn weaknesses into strength here."

Kaisal mulled over my words for several seconds, absorbing my implication. I could see in his eyes that he despised the idea of associating with prey animals. However, we were together in

having a critical weakness, which was not acceptable to Betterment. His other option was to return to the Dominion as a wimpy traitor; his own issues were why he'd been running from Wriss to start with.

Convincing him that every Federation herbivore is not the enemy can come another day. I need only his toleration and his compliance.

"It is nice to be able to control my actions, and to be treated as an equal." Kaisal tapped a claw against his maw, and leveled my gaze. "I've never been this well-fed in my life. I'll do whatever you say, and…*try* to put up with any animals, as long as that stays true."

I lashed my tail. "Good. I need an advisor—someone who can speak of the humans, and their troops, from firsthand knowledge. I'm willing to take you under my wing, and teach you how to be tougher in return. Defective or not, I assure you I know much about military practices and the crueler arts."

"We all know of your achievements, Isif. I don't doubt your mettle."

"As it should be. I've spoken enough words. Do you accept this advisor position?"

"Gladly I do. I…always hated the species I was a part of, sir. All my peers bashing weakness, the wretched lives we lead, being forced to join the war; I had nothing. If I must fight, I'm glad it can be for a chance to not fight and not starve."

"Words to live by. Well, Advisor Kaisal, I imagine you feel the same as most Arxur about talking. However, we're going to do a lot of it in here, and we start now. These topics are too important to let solitary natures get to any of us."

"Understood. I put up with humans on the cradle *and* on Earth. I am somewhat used to it."

"Truly, you can learn to tolerate anything in time. Let's begin with discussing the war strategies, and Dominion movements, shall we?"

Olek and Lisa pulled up an overview of our total assets, as well as noteworthy developments in logistics and internal sentiments. The last known locations of Dominion forces were also included; keeping ourselves multiple light-years away from their prowling ships was key. Kaisal still shot occasional glances at Felra, though he seemed willing not to pounce at her. My new advisor leaned in, and put his own mind to work assessing our potential targets.

I wasn't sure how we could get the upper hand against Betterment, but I liked the team I had at my side. With lab-grown meat gifted to us by Earth, we were stronger today than we were yesterday. My sole focus was chipping away at the Dominion's armor, and waiting for the humans to commit to our cause.

Chapter 119

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 15, 2137

The humans were checking their timekeeping instruments; Kaisal still had three minutes to arrive for our briefing. The scrawny Arxur had no intention of lingering for an extra second of chatter, and was leaving the pre-meeting socializing to us. The command structure here monitored ship activity near our stealth habitat, which was hidden within Harchen space. Fahl and its subsidiaries were just across the border of what once had been Shaza's sector. We were keeping vigilant for any new Dominion attacks.

With Kaisal's arrival still pending, that left time for Felra to poke and prod as she always did. The Dossur stayed away from the general Arxur populace; I was glad that word of her presence hadn't gotten around, after yesterday's confession. It wasn't safe for her to encounter any non-empathetic Arxur, and even those with softer emotions might not be fond of her. The primates had been a positive presence that grounded her socially, especially with her curiosity about mankind.

"Planning operations against the Dominion is important. We can't have Giznel thinking we'll run," I mused aloud. "Keeping our morale up is partly my outreach, and partly scoring some victories. How are each of you holding up?"

Olek adjusted his glasses. "Seeing Arxur up close…I don't know. I loved the idea of meeting aliens, but the videos we saw of you on Earth…they were gruesome. Had no clue you were being starved by your own government, on purpose. Guess that shows what you get knowing one side of the story; a lesson I've preached my whole life. I've come around to thinking you're a cool guy, Siffy, if a bit prickly."

"They always taught us the grays were incapable of compassion. Clearly not true across the board; you're sweet." Felra's whiskers twitched, and I wondered once more how she could stand me. If the humans used "grays" or "sweet", I would've smacked them, but I let it slide in the Dossur's case. "We're not worth the effort to collect,

so the Dossur weren't your typical victims. I'd see the horrible things on the news, but they happened to someone else."

My nostrils flared. "Hrr. I tried to be as cruel as possible, for Betterment's liking, and to think of what would hurt people most in my attacks. I brainstormed a number of those horrible things you saw. I know I had no choice, but perhaps I was lying when I said fault could not be assigned, yes?"

"I don't think it's your fault. Everyone taught you that was right, just like people taught me all predators are evil. By the time you actually got real power, you were doing what kept you alive before."

"Millions died as a direct consequence of my orders, Felra. I've eaten prey like you alive! I executed my own kind, targeted herbivore schools on purpose, and ran cattle farms."

"Those were mistakes, but you didn't know there was another option, except to die. You gave the cattle back to Tarva, and you want the future to be different. Don't you want to do what's right for us all, Siffy?"

"I…yes, of course I do! You're one strange Dossur. Why are you like this?"

"Well, I know who you are and what you've done *now*. The future is what matters, making things change. What do you want to do when the war ends?"

"I've never thought about it. Ask the leaf-lickers."

Felra turned an inquisitive eye toward the two human guards, whose wistful gazes landed on her. The thought of going home to Earth, with the war settled and opportunities abounding, seemed to fill them with a wishful mindset. I'd listened to the two describe the concept of homesickness, which I couldn't wrap my mind around. Terrans were sentimental predators, more than willing to domesticate themselves to boring pastimes.

"When everything settles down, I'd like to start my own business," Lisa said. "Something like a coffee shop, where people can come to relax and play board games. I like the idea of bringing people together."

I narrowed my eyes. "*That* is your grand ambition?"

“Who said it has to be grand? What’s important is having a life that’s fulfilling. Bringing positive vibes, and leaving the world a better place. Also, I thought my sister was dead for a few weeks, so it’ll be nice to hug her again. We still haven’t had that reunion, and it would be cathartic.”

“Typical humans. They give better, more censored answers, yes, Felra? Ah, don’t answer that. What’s your lame ambition, broken-eyes?”

Olek scowled at me. “It’s like the glasses are the only thing you see about me! You’re an old man. I’m gonna fuckin’ laugh when your vision starts going.”

“Ah, Olek, your true vision failing is your blindness to reality. Nobody’s gonna believe you worked with Arxur rebels. It’ll just be another of your crazy stories,” Lisa teased.

“Maybe I’ll pitch the story to Hollywood then! Writing a book doesn’t seem *that* hard, and it’s a guaranteed bestseller. How Earth secretly worked with the Arxur, all the way up to the Secretary-General, while building their superweapons! All that shit about Giznel writes itself too: starvation, an unwritten agreement with the Feds.”

I sighed in annoyance. “You must have more serious aspirations than that. Don’t you have people you care about?”

The conspiracy theorist fell into a contemplative silence. “I do. There’s a human kid I’d like to see succeed. I was…adopted, so foster children are an issue close to my heart. Everyone deserves to land on their feet, you know?”

Kaisal strolled into the room, and our self-indulgent chatter ceased in an instant. I’d been trying to gauge if there was a trace of defectiveness in him, but my new second-in-command hated socializing. He seated himself far away from Felra and the primates, taking it upon himself to boot up my messaging system. There was a file sent from the Secretary-General’s office, which was flagged *Urgent intelligence.*

I’d just spoken to Zhao a day ago at length, so I wasn’t sure what could’ve happened between now and then. It wasn’t important enough to merit an in-person call to interrupt, but the human government wasn’t known for meaningless communiques. The

arboreal predators were excellent at sifting through oodles of information. Weaponized knowledge was among their primary fortes.

“Prepare the projector,” I ordered Kaisal. “Go on. Olek, Lisa, any Dominion movement on the ship tracker?”

Olek leaned closer to the sensors readout. “No Arxur vessels within five light-years of the habitat. I see a sizable contingent of Federation craft, which seem to be on a sweeping patrol.”

“From the faint trails we can pick up, and known identifiers, those ships look to be Kolshian. That might be what Zhao is informing you of. Earth was due to launch operations against them any day. The bastards could just be on high alert, or moving in on another UN ally, like they did the Dossur.”

“Do you have any thoughts, Kaisal? We welcome your input,” I prompted.

Kaisal kept his controlled pupils on the screen. “I think the Kolshians deserve to die, for what they did to us. They’re the party behind our starvation. They’re here. We should kill them.”

“Prophet-Descendant Giznel told me that the Commonwealth conceals their true strength. We are in a vulnerable position. We must exercise caution.”

“After the…animal you keep with you, it would be a way to prove you’re not with the Federation. They’re our enemy as much as the Dominion.”

“What Isif is saying is that we should win one battle first before taking on another,” Felra chimed in.

“Nobody asked for prey’s opinion.”

“You will not speak to her like that!” I roared, blowing Lisa’s hair out of her face from the force of my exhale. “NEVER AGAIN!”

“I said…I would tolerate it. I’ve done that, but no amount of food, or threats, can push me further. Do we have a problem, Isif?”

“No. Do not address Felra at all, if you cannot be polite. Brief me on Zhao’s message, now.”

Kaisal swallowed, a lump passing down his throat. He transferred the contents onto the holoprojector, and allowed us to read at our own pace. The Secretary-General informed us that these were

intercepted messages sent between the Kolshian Commonwealth's Office of the Chieftain, and the Arxur Dominion's Betterment office. That was enough to cause me to narrow my eyes in confusion. Since when did those two parties directly communicate?

Prophet-Descendant Giznel stated that their agreement was unspoken. Perhaps that wasn't the whole truth, or they're trying to establish backchannels for some reason.

The scrawny Arxur wagged a claw. "Should I play the video logs?"

"Yes," I growled.

Kaisal clicked on the video clip, which showed an indigo Kolshian initiating the conversation. Despite the wrinkles on his face, Nikonus had a way of scowling with his bulbous, side-facing eyes that made him look threatening. He folded his tentacles across his chest, and turned one pupil on the camera. There wasn't a trace of fear, despite the fact that this was directed at Betterment. I wondered how the humans had gotten a hold of this footage, but there was rarely any explanation of their methods.

"The Dominion interfered with our operations at Mileau," Nikonus stated in a cold voice. "Though we've never spoken, I thought there was an agreement between our offices. Explain yourselves, or you will face our unfettered wrath…as we are showing the humans."

After several minutes of footage, which Zhao had scrubbed through in the package, Prophet-Descendant Giznel appeared on screen. I could tell from his locked teeth that he didn't like speaking to an herbivore. It was remarkable that he would accept a direct invitation to parlay from the Kolshians; it was apparent Betterment did not want a war with the Commonwealth, if they'd go to such lengths. Nikonus must have reasons to wish for the Dominion's continued existence as well.

A hiss emanated from Giznel's throat. "As your control slips, ours does as well. That was an action of a rogue Chief Hunter, Isif, who apparently seeks to rebel against the Dominion. He thinks that he can rule all by himself. He's blasting the tune of peace and satiety to anyone who will listen. The arrangement with Betterment still stands."

"I see. Don't get me wrong; we hate you, and I know you hate us," Nikonus said. "The Kolshians grasp our moral imperative to fix the

galaxy, but that is a centuries-long process…these humans have been a major setback. There are untapped worlds out there. We need one predator around, and the last thing I want is a fucking Arxur asking for peace! It makes you look good."

"I know; it's sickening. A fat, lazy Dominion without Betterment? The war must continue, for the sake of control. We're trying to hunt Isif down, but he's been elusive."

"I will send ships to put an end to this sycophant. We always have a few tricks behind our tentacles. Just remember your role, and you can go about your merry raiding in peace."

The Kolshian ended the transmission link, and the five of us sat in silence. Kaisal looked the most shocked of us all, seeing the Dominion's highest levels openly cooperating with the Federation's leader. I was floored that Nikonus would volunteer his forces to flush us out; with my past knowledge about their motives, it was easy to reconcile their actions. My push for peace was antithetical to their desire for a forever war, which conveniently depicted predators as mindless drones.

What would the other herbivores think, if this footage got out? Surely the United Nations could use this to garner more support; they were always looking for a propaganda angle. Lisa and Olek had returned their focus to the sensors screen. The humans were muttering to themselves about the Kolshian ships sweeping entire systems, meandering toward us. My maw jerked with realization, and I realized the Federation were seeking out an attack against my rebellion.

The habitat is cloaked, but the Kolshians seem to think that can't stop them. Nikonus mentioned tricks, and even Giznel thought they were stronger than they let on. That they could beat us in a no-holds-barred fight.

Racking my brain for ideas, I transmitted orders to all patrollers and warships to be on stand-by for combat. The slow-moving habitat wouldn't be able to outrun the Kolshians, who were a few light years out; it also would alert them to our presence definitively, and leave a clear trail, if we jumped out via FTL. I turned to Olek, and barked for him to dial up the Secretary-General in a hurry. The humans had sent us this intelligence, so they must have some idea of what we should do.

“Hello, Isif. I was expecting you might call.” Zhao’s form was visible on screen, as he rode in some antiquated airplane. A slight smirk was on his face, though I saw some signs of sleep deprivation which I’d noted in Elias Meier. “It surprised the United Nations as well, and I figured it would be critical intelligence to pass along to you.”

“It is—thank you. But the Kolshians are already coming for us. There’s thousands of ships rooting out any rebellion assets, drawing nearer to us. Escape isn’t a viable option, and I must be a critical asset for you to preserve, yes?! Please…you have to help, human,” I hissed.

A taut grimace crossed his face, though I knew that generals of his caliber only revealed as much emotion as they wanted to. It was a promising sign that Zhao would show his concern; however, what we needed was a commitment of ships to ward off the Kolshians. If Nikonus had the extraneous resources to devote to our demise, there was no telling how many total craft were under his control. I wouldn’t make the mistake of writing them off as a weak herbivore military.

“Humanity is engaged in many battles. Mileau is still an ongoing affair, with a bit of a stand-off ensuing. The Kolshians possess drone technology, which our nanodrones neutralized, yet we lack numbers to dismantle their fleet. They’re using biological weaponry against our ground assets, so those missions have been called off. Tell your Dossur friend we’re sorry it’s been a mixed bag, will you?” Zhao asked.

Felra skittered up to the camera lens. “I’m glad that you tried. We… I don’t want you to throw human lives away.”

“We did what we could, but it’s always my goal to stop senseless loss of life. I will do whatever is necessary to keep Earth and humanity safe. That’s my policy, to the day I draw my last breath. Anyhow, we also have a good chunk of ships forging ahead to Kolshian and Farsul territory, which should be a vicious fight. Tack on the defensive requisites and we’re short on ships to spare.”

“If you don’t help us, the rebellion ends today. You’re damning my species to extinction!” I spat.

Earth’s leader raised his hands placatingly. “Let me finish. I’m thinking aloud here. We must remain decidedly neutral at this time; we don’t want a fight with the Dominion. UN vessels will not fire

upon Arxur craft. We're already warring with one giant, and Giznel declaring war on us might bury us."

"It's not the Arxur. I don't see any of ours in the count, and we can handle a few Dominion scouts."

"Well, we're at war with the Kolshians already, so they *are* fair game. It's a poor example to let them go wherever they like and lash out, in our territory. The Harchen are a Terran protectorate. We didn't let the Arxur have Fahl, so we sure won't be letting the Federation get their tentacles on our space. We have the political cover."

"So you'll help?"

"I'll help, but you'll need to come to us. I don't have assets within an hour's travel. Warp your assets to the UN garrison at Fahl, and we'll handle any Kolshians that follow you. To be clear, this is not an outward declaration of support. It's a one-time pact."

"Understood. Thank you, Mr. Secretary-General."

Zhao dipped his head, and signed off the call. I told Kaisal to transmit the coordinates to the habitat's forces, while encouraging them to make a rapid evacuation. A rendezvous with the UN fleet aided our chances, though I was still nervous about a large-scale battle. Such broad conflicts hadn't been how our insurgency operated; we'd adopted the policy of quiet disruption, due to our lack of numbers. Felra tugged at my claws, which I yanked back.

Crazy Dossur. If she grabs those stabbing instruments and I don't see her, her throat might end up like those gouged Kolshians back at her research station. It's not like the humans' weak fingers.

"What is your problem, rodent?" I snarled. "This is not the time—"

Felra pulled on my paw insistently. "I want you to know it's going to be okay. And I want you to pick me up!"

I huffed in outright irritation, noticing the withering look on Kaisal's face. My paw slid under her stomach, hoisting her on an express journey to my shoulder. Felra nuzzled against my chin, mere inches below where my serrated fangs showed. Perhaps it would've been better to leave her at Proxima Centauri, rather than suffer this constant embarrassment. I was the leader of a faction of apex predators, not some toy!

“Do you trust these humans not to attack you? It could be a trap,” Kaisal grumbled.

“It’s not. It’s not pure altruism either; it’s useful to them to keep us alive. They wouldn’t have bothered to support us at all if they wanted to kill us. We’re going to Fahl, and we’re going to fight… whatever good that may do.”

Lisa ran a hand through her hair. “Fahl. That’s where we were stationed before Mileau—it’s all come full circle. I hope the forces are ready to receive some Kolshians.”

“Chief Calamari’s gonna get a boot in his squid behind. Have some faith, Siffy,” Olek declared.

I heaved a weary sigh, and summoned a warship for myself. A good leader, in the Arxur tradition, commanded by example; we were supposed to be the most fearsome hunters alive. It wasn’t clear if that was still true, after my exposure to this inane Dossur, but I intended to do what I could at Fahl. The Kolshians wouldn’t put our rebellion to bed if I had anything to say about it.

Chapter 120

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 15, 2137

The predators' war strategy hinged around hitting the two Federation founders where it hurt. The Kolshians always offer severe resistance, as they proved they could hold their own against the masters of killing, after all. During my therapy sessions, one topic discussed was the reality that the Commonwealth could've intervened on the cradle. They'd possessed the technology and the numbers to smack an Arxur raid down like it was nothing; instead, they'd watched as the Gojids were pushed to the precipice of extinction.

Had I known about Nikonus' apathetic view of our woes, back when Cilany and I visited Aafa, I would've gutted him with my claws then. The Kolshians would be the more satisfying of the founding duo to combat; I could envision the smug look on their chief's face. However, on an objective level, it was clear-cut which conspirator was the easiest to undermine. The Farsul States were the brains of the empire, and their worlds were ripe for the taking.

The Farsul and the Kolshians disagreed on the handling of humanity's survival, with the States contributing to the ill-fated extermination fleet. Their ships were known for being damage-sponges, a more prey-like and displayable attribute than their conspiratorial counterparts. The Farsul elders, like their Ambassador Darq, made a grave error of judgment at the summit on humanity; tipped off about their genocide participation by Earth, the Arxur moved in on their homeworld, Talsk. The grays' raid nearly succeeded, and was warded off with substantial losses.

I'm sure Talsk has rebuilt its forces, just as Earth has replaced their army. Still, they've been weakened by the war, while the Kolshians have been waiting in the wings.

Cilany listened astutely, as I told her via FTL call-link what I was authorized to disclose. "So let me get this straight. You're going to drop into Talsk's inner orbit within minutes, and land solely to access the Galactic Archives?"

“That’s correct,” I answered. “Humanity can’t afford to spare troops on an occupation. They don’t bomb civilians either. The goal is to trap the Farsul within their own world, and cut them off from the galaxy.”

“And they’re pulling any crew with training in ground combat from the starship? Including you and your human pals.”

“Crewing the ships was equally as difficult as building them, Cilly. Logistically, we don’t want more mouths to feed up here, and we also need men for every battleground and occupation across the galaxy. Sillis, Fahl, Mileau, ground defenses. If you can hold a gun and keep your wits, you’re part of the landing party.”

Tyler referred to it as being a utility player in a game called baseball, which involved smacking a stone with a metal club. I didn’t grasp what he was on about, and I didn’t dare to ask. That human was rather unapologetic with his predatory hobbies.

Cilany pressed her toes to her head. “So you’re cobbling together the ‘nonessentials’ from your ship, and they’re all heading planetside *during* an orbital battle? That’s suicide.”

“The predators have a distraction planned. The Farsul ships should be…concerned with other events. I’ll be fine. We’ve got a plan.”

A plan that involves de-orbiting a lunar body, and fits in with the general picture of Terran psychosis. A normal day in the United Nations’ service.

“Thanks for the non-answer,” the Harchen reporter grumbled. “I thought we were friends, Sovlin! Give me something. Like…why was there satellite footage of naval armaments being loaded on to Terran carriers, which we know from subspace trails were heading Federation-bound?”

That was the other deranged part of the mission, which was anything but a routine landing. The Terrans noticed a patch of Talsk’s ocean was unreadable by standard sensors, during stealth recon. Intelligence coupled this with communications between Archives staff, discussing “shipping exercises.” Like any normal species, the primates drew the conclusion that the Farsul were hiding incriminating information underwater…and based their mission parameters on this assumption.

Did the United Nations believe that habitats under the ocean were

possible? If the humans weren't grasping at straws on this one, I'd be beyond impressed with their deductive skills. At this point, I didn't think their insanity was up for debate. Cilany wasn't going to hear intel that was damaging to their species' reasoning skills from me.

"Don't pretend you don't know about the boats," she pressed. "What good do those do in an orbital clash? Are you landing by water ship?"

I jabbed a sharp claw at the camera. "If you wanted to know that, you'd be here with us. They'd sign off on it, undoubtedly. Believe it or not, humans send reporters with their troops into war zones."

"I've heard of them. 'War correspondents,' covering conflict from the front lines, armed only with a camera. I'm willing to take risks for a scoop, but that's lunacy! I, as a non-human, like to gather my stories in areas without active firefights."

"These FTL comms saved your ass then. You'd be out of the loop for weeks. I'll keep you informed of the results when the mission is complete."

"I won't push you more, for now. Whatever you find in the Archives, I want to be the first to know."

"I'll see what I can do. So long."

My eyes turned to the triangular shuttle waiting in the hangar bay. I was aware the Terrans had a myriad of new contraptions, but this design seemed foolhardy to me. A narrow, aerodynamic vehicle was optimal for atmospheric travel. Thankfully, I didn't have to pilot this craft; while it was made to transport crew, it was self-flying.

Samantha and Carlos had saved me a seat, while Tyler and Onso manned what was considered the back-up pilot and co-pilot's chairs. What I'd been told at the briefing was that we would descend to sea level, before transferring to a submarine. My immediate inquiry was if the humans had ever seen a Gojid swim, but they just laughed. The amusement was followed by a patronizing smile, and a response of "That won't be necessary."

I swear, if the plan is for me to ride on Carlos' back and no one is telling me, I'm gonna claw some binocular eyes out.

"Hello, Onso." I recalled Dr. Bahri's advice to be kinder to the primitive in my inner dialogue, rather than regarding him only by

his innate ignorance. “You ready?”

The Yotul flicked his reddish ears. “I mentioned on shore leave that I wanted to break Farsul skulls. They have their paws in every pot, every mind in the Federation. I’m sure as shit ready to fight them.”

“I’ll be honest, I’m a little nervous. Land creatures don’t belong… sinking into the ocean. I mean, this submersible ship does not float. How do we get back up?”

“Same as flying. Air currents versus water currents. You trust human tech or you don’t.”

“I’m more comfortable in space too, but it’s good the navy is finally going to get a cut of the action. Humanity needs to win on every terrain and theater of war,” Carlos growled.

“My comments about the space era aged like milk,” Samantha griped. “I called a sailor friend of John…of my husband’s ‘obsolete’, and now they’re airdropping warboats. Just my luck; I’ll never hear the end of it if they get a single kill.”

I gently tapped her hand with my paw. “It might be good for you to reconnect with some of your old friends.”

“Spare me the ‘Kumbaya’ therapy shit. I mean, good for you, but you don’t need to proselytize.”

Tyler cleared his throat. “Let’s keep it professional, people. We’re pulling a stealth jump behind each of Talsk’s four moons, but we can’t get closer than that. Entering real space any second.”

“As if you’re professional,” Onso snorted.

“Remind me how many *game* controllers you’ve broken? We’re so close to kicking these Feddies in the backside, and I want—no, I need to get this perfect. Are all of you ready?”

“I’d like to live to see the Federation fall,” Sam sighed. “Ready, sir.”

“And I’d like to live to see galactic peace,” Carlos countered. “Ready here too, sir.”

Before I could offer up my own assent, Tyler raised a hand for silence. The shuttle’s digitized replica of the main viewport depicted the shadow of a moon, and a small handful of human carriers snuck through other gravitational hiding spots as well. Launching too soon or too late would result in our demise. We had to wait for the distraction to draw the Farsul’s attention; I had no idea how

humans planned to move the smallest lunar satellite.

The fact that we got this close, under their nose, shows the lasting consequences of the Arxur attack. The Farsul's barebones defenses aren't equipped to catch us in their net; their outposts, with key scanners, were picked apart too.

The enemy would be alerted to our presence, once the predators made their move to disturb the smallest moon. The target body lagged a short ways behind our satellite haven's orbit, which meant our carrier could watch the show. Human military affairs always intrigued me, from how they conjured the impossible with every battle. There was "thinking outside the box", and then there was ignoring the box's existence altogether. Rules and conventional wisdom didn't apply to them.

Our viewport plucked stills of box-shaped human craft. In real time, they were blurs that accelerated from behind the target moon's shadow; that energy expenditure definitely caught the Farsul's eyes. The objects had been gaining momentum within subspace, and exited warp at a mind-boggling pace. These were evident drones, though they were unlike the Terrans' conventional battle technology. I squinted in confusion, as the lead cubical craft blazed toward the deformed rock without slowing.

The first impact caused a geyser of debris to erupt from the moon, while the drone was obliterated. There appeared to be a slight slowing of the lunar body's orbit, though it was fractional. It was insanity to think they could redirect a celestial object's momentum. The humans were undeterred, however, and launched more of the peculiar boxes into the moon.

"Reverent Protector," I murmured. "They're chipping away at its momentum. Throwing ships at it…"

"Until it changes course." Carlos released a shrill noise by blowing air through his teeth, which made me flinch. "It's simple kinetic impact. I remember we used this same tech to deflect an asteroid from Earth back in 2129."

Onso flicked his ears. "It's like shifting a boulder that's already rolling downhill. It's got a shit ton of momentum, but you collide enough objects, with enough force, and you could theoretically change where it's rolling to."

“So this was a brute-force planetary defense system, that you weaponized because you’re predators. Carry on, I guess,” I huffed.

Panicked Farsul ships rushed toward the moon, but they, understandably, were not prepared to stop murderous monkeys from dislodging a massive satellite. The United Nations chipped away at the orbital momentum, deflection by deflection, until the speeding rock had visibly changed its arc. Talsk’s gravity won out in the absence of a blistering orbital velocity, and the mile-wide rock began to careen toward the planet.

Tyler took that as our cue to launch the triangular shuttle, which was prepped for this moment, away from our carrier. The Farsul vessels concentrated fire on their falling moon, and struggled to simultaneously fend off Terran warships which harassed them on approach. To top it off, our big guns were within orbital range, but the predators were using precision strikes against bases rather than antimatter city hits.

There was no way for the enemy to watch for surface-bound transports, with all of the chaos preoccupying them. I wasn’t surprised that no craft moved to intercept us, and that the ride down to Talsk’s surface looked to be seamless. The idea of descending below the ocean still left me riddled with unease; my spines were bristling, and it wasn’t from the humans’ eyes.

“Your crazy plan worked.” I tried to focus on the Farsul missiles fruitlessly impacting their own moon, rather than the blue patches enlarging before us. “I’d love to have ears inside the enemy ships. They don’t even know what hit them.”

“Ah, yes. Doesn’t it suck when your moon becomes a meteor with a few love taps?” Sam snickered.

Tyler allowed himself an amused snort. “Yeah, I hate when that happens. Really ruins your day.”

We breached the atmosphere in graceful flight, with flaming resistance enveloping our ship outside. The battle overhead receded into the background; it wasn’t our job to spectate the Farsul moon’s fate. Our shuttle’s autopilot had everything under control, throttling through the outer bands of a foreign world. It slowed our pace to a manageable glide, once the sparkling ocean grew nearer. Water stretched as far as the eye could see, even from hundreds of meters up.

There was nowhere to land that I could make out, and the ropes and parachutes at the rear of the aircraft pushed a suggestion into my brain. What if the plan was for us to jump or rappel from the aircraft, onto a submarine's hull? Where were the submersibles anyways…had their airdrop not preceded us as planned? My claws wrapped around the harness tighter; everything that could go wrong was at the forefront of my mind.

We're slowing down, but not fast enough! Something must be off with the computer. We're going to slam belly-first into the water, not hover.

The humans weren't panicking, so I tried to convince myself that those thoughts were my fear speaking. However, the choppiness of the waves was visible, and I saw no way to stop in time…at least, not without an inertial dampener failure and the death of us all. My remaining spines were trying to escape from my back; I was almost ready to scream to brace for impact. A mechanism shifted in the shuttle's belly, and it was then that I suspected we were gliding for a landing.

We touched the surface of the water, but instead of sinking, we bobbed gently like a leaf. Our supports splashed the water, and slowed, while balancing atop the waves like it was nothing. I breathed an uneasy sigh of relief, grateful that I had kept my mouth shut amid the humans' composure. The predators always had wild plans, like plunking an airworthy craft into desolate seas. We were out of the proverbial burrows.

Then, without warning, the floats gave out, dropping all support from the triangular craft. Primal terror gnawed at my heart, as our ship started to sink.

Chapter 121

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 15, 2137

It wasn't my imagination; our triangular shuttle was sinking like a stone. Water bobbed up against the cockpit windows, entombing us beneath the waves. Hull integrity would eventually give out and allow water to flood the compartment. The predators were just watching it happen, with not nearly enough panic showing in their binocular eyes. They made no attempt to inflate a life raft and escape, while we could still get the doors open.

The craft had tipped forward at a slight angle, and the airborne vehicle began to sink nose-first toward a watery grave. A feeling of immense claustrophobia gripped me, as the nightmare scenario came to fruition. My claws wrapped around Samantha's arm before I could stop myself; the human looked at me with sheer disbelief, and pushed me away. Her nose was scrunched in an obvious sign of distaste. Carlos would've definitely been more amenable to my desperate outreach for support.

Samantha heaved a sigh. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just fucking do that, but it better not *ever* happen again."

"Please! We're sinking!" I croaked.

Onso snickered. "Sinking? You don't feel the engines running? It's a submersible aircraft."

Upon closer listening, I could feel the quiet hum of the engines. Somehow, the combustion drive was still running underwater, and pushing us in a controlled manner further into the ocean. There were no signs of leaks seeping through the walls, despite being encased in the depths. I'd never heard of a plane that could fly underwater, but I should've gleaned our safety from the predators' calmness.

If a human is running or terrified, that's when it's time to assume our deaths are imminent.

Sam wasn't the least bit amused by me latching onto her arm, but Tyler and Carlos were both masking smirks. I dipped my head in

shame. How had the Yotul known of technology which was unfathomable to the wider galaxy? Until today, I wouldn't have thought such devices would ever have a use. It was embarrassing that the primitive kept his head better than me around novel technology, though I tried to push that egoistic thought out of my mind.

"Do the Yotul have this kind of technology, Onso?" I prompted the reddish-furred marsupial to answer, though I knew the reply would be in the negative. "I've never heard of such things, so I'm surprised it's old news to you."

"Well, I took it upon myself to read up on the specs; they were included with our briefing notes. Never know when shit's gonna break, and someone's gotta fix it. The Yotul have a saying, 'Everything can break, so assume it will do so today.'"

"That's valid. Every spacecraft crash is due to a 'one-in-a-billion' mechanical failure; unlikelihood upon unlikelihood. Uh, anyhow, I'm a little out of my element here, clearly nothing like you."

"I don't mind the water, Sovlin. Mama had a sailboat, which she'd take around the harbor. It was a little disappointing to hear human water activities involve hunting. There's so many beautiful things to see; it's the last untamed frontier. Even after space is explored, the oceans still hold so many mysteries and unique lifeforms!"

"Plenty of humans agree with you, even ones who enjoy fishing like Tyler. We'll go snorkeling or scuba diving just to explore reefs and view marine life," Carlos chimed in. "No boat, nothing but a basic breathing apparatus."

"There's water sports too. Surfing, where you try to ride massive waves on a board." Samantha made odd gestures with her hands, as though conveying a series of hills. "Parasailing, up in the sky tied to a boat. White water rafting, where you go down turbulent, rocky rapids in an inflatable."

I groaned. "Why…are any of those *not* mortally dangerous?! What is wrong with you predators? I thought you evolved from the fucking trees!"

"It's all in the spirit of fun, a memorable experience. Don't tell me none of it sounds like something you want to try once."

"No, those stunts sound horrible. *This* is horrible. I can see the

depth meter going up…it's double digits! I can't see the sky!"

"Quit being a baby."

"Quit being a predator! I hate humans; I can't stand you! Onso, back me up."

"The surfing sounds totally badass. I can imagine riding a wave up to its crest, and trying not to fall," the Yotul answered. "We should try it together, old man. Conquer your fears, do things you think you can't."

"I am not doing that. No way on the cradle."

Tyler sported a devilish grin. "Hey, it could be worse, Sovlin. You could be doing shark cage diving."

I offered the blond human a blank stare. Through the cockpit behind him, I noticed orange-striped fish swimming clear of the aerosub. There was a dark shadow in the murky depths below, which filled me with palpable unease. What if it was some sort of massive predator which hid in this oceanic range? Chewing at my claws with anxiety, I tried to parse through what he said.

Cage diving? That can't be what it sounds like; locking yourself in a cage and jumping into the water…not trying to escape. What's a shark?

We moved closer to the ambiguous shadow within the turquoise ocean, which I tried to ignore. The humans would freak out if there was reason for alarm; I couldn't make a fool of myself again. Plastering a look of confusion on my face, I flicked a claw at Tyler for an explanation. His blue eyes twinkled with amusement, and my former guards watched with interest.

"Ah, you're wondering what that is." Officer Cardona tapped his fingers against his holopad, and noticed that his Yotul exchange partner was intrigued too. He showed a picture to Onso first. "I'd say it's self-explanatory. Oh, and, yes, they have side-facing eyes, but sharks are predators. Humans have movies about them eating us, even though that's uncommon in reality."

Tyler turned the device toward me, and I flinched away with disbelief. Sure enough, a pack of Terrans were suspended in a metal cage below the water. "Sharks" circled them with predatory intent, serrated teeth visible. From what I'd learned about Gojids being omnivores, I'd trust the primates on binocular eyes not being necessary to eat living food. However, deciphering human behavior

was a maddening endeavor. Was this some twisted way of reasserting their dominance as apex predators, against animals that dared to prey on them?

“You just said it was in fucked-up human movies…it’s CGI! That’s not a real fucking thing!” I screamed. “I thought we were keeping it *professional,* huh? You all are definitely saying, and making up, predator nonsense on purpose, at this point!”

Tyler flashed his teeth. “It’s real. We don’t need to make anything up; humans will go to great lengths for thrills.”

“That seems to be tempting fate. I’ve always believed in respecting nature, though it would be cool to see these animals up close,” Onso said.

“Good news: you can see them in aquariums too.”

I thought humans would think water decorations were stupid…wait, what did he just say?!

My spines were bristling. “You have aquariums, like the Kolshians on Aafa?”

“Yep,” Tyler affirmed.

“And instead of sea plants, you keep dangerous predators in them?”

“Yeah? They’re cool to look at, man.”

“Protector, I don’t care if we’re in the middle of the ocean. I want off this sinking boat!”

Carlos stifled a laugh. “Well, your wish is about to be granted. This puppy isn’t meant to dive deeper than 100 meters. The *UNS Deep Core* is up ahead.”

The foreboding shadow had grown larger in my periphery, and my eyes swiveled back to the viewport. It was a submersed ship, but one that was so large, its breadth faded into the murky distance. There was no way this wasn’t in the triple digits of meters long; the all-black, undecorated exterior would cause an observer to mistake it for a shadowy patch of water. There was a tower affixed to its spine, which perhaps housed an equivalent to a bridge.

“The humans must’ve snuck this ship here days ago. How long has it been lurking?” I murmured to myself. “They couldn’t have airdropped it from too high up either…I don’t think.”

Samantha rubbed her hands together. “If you think this is the only one sent, think again. We’re told as much as we need to know, Sovlin, but it’s a blast to fill in the blanks.”

Our aerosub glided down to the bottom of the *Deep Core*, before flipping over and latching onto a watertight door. It was similar to how a spacecraft would dock for boarding; my concerns were assuaged a little, noticing some familiarity. Packing such a large crew into a metal tube must be stressful for any land-dwelling species, but the humans were insane enough to tuck their senses aside. There could be enough predators aboard to compose a small village.

I disliked the fact that I was hanging at a ninety-degree angle, though I didn’t voice my complaints. The humans awkwardly dismounted, with Tyler helping Onso down. Carlos hoisted me to my own two feet, and I took a steadying breath. Our own watertight hatch, which I mistook for an emergency exit when I thought it was a sane vehicle, was on the right exit. There was a click, as human personnel opened the circular door from the other side.

The five of us were helped up through the threshold into the submarine, and we admired the metal inner workings of our surroundings. The tunnels were narrow, with small doorways leading between compartments; many required a slight step up to clear. One Terran greeted us at our docking point, though he wore a different uniform than the getup I was used to. I wasn’t sure what to expect from land predators who operated underwater, but the ample facial hair checked out with my mental image.

“Welcome aboard the *Deep Core*. I’m Commander Fournier; your presence is requested on the bridge,” a gruff voice greeted us.

I blinked in confusion. “May I ask why…sir?”

“First aliens to step foot on a submarine. You’re VIPs; it’s a good photo-op, you could say. Follow me.”

Of course, the humans are worried about optics as we’re descending to an outlandish location. Sometimes, they’re awfully predictable.

Claustrophobia threatened to flare up, with the cramped passages and lack of direction. Onso showed no such uneasiness, forcing Tyler to ensure that the Yotul studied objects with his eyes, not his

paws. The primitive seemed enamored with any machinery or design quirks, even basic things such as hinges. I was really trying not to look down on him, but when he was gawking at simplistic nails, it was difficult. At least his dimwitted curiosity was a distraction from our present environment.

The bearded commander led us to a steep stairway, and communicated for us to follow his lead. There was a thunderous bark of “up ladder!” before the human-in-charge popped open a hatch. Tyler waved a hand at me and Onso, signaling for us to climb after Fournier first. I ensured that my balance was steady, hustling up the rungs. There was a railing surrounding the hatch, along with a safety chain that our guide was unclipping.

“Sir, may I ask how much air we have left?” I couldn’t resist asking, despite being out of breath from the short ascent. “I presume you’ve been submerged a few days. Even spaceships can only carry a few weeks of oxygen, and I don’t see any tanks, um…”

Fournier issued a throaty laugh. “Scared of submarines, Gojid?”

“A little, uh, yes…sir.”

“Don’t be. We have as much air as there is water in the ocean.”

Onso bounded after us. “The Terrans use electrolysis to separate the hydrogen from the oxygen in seawater they collect, then use that O2 to ventilate the ship.”

“Why, I like this one!” the commander bellowed. “Read up on subs, haven’t ya?”

“It drew me in…like a vortex of knowledge. I always liked machines.”

“Then I take it you’re an engineer? I can see that kid-like glee in your eyes.”

“A rocket engineer. The unchanging rules, the complex order, the concreteness and the planning: it speaks to me. Having a new class of machines to study really lit that fire, for the first time since the Federation killed my passion. Not even studying your weaponry truly scratched that itch. It’s just, I never dreamed I’d discover a new alien boat!”

“Well, well! I’m no engineer, but I’ll be happy to share what I know. Feel free to ask any questions; we love talking about what we do, to

someone who really wants to hear it."

"Thank you, sir."

Commander Fournier led us into a stout compartment, where a vast array of gadgetry and screens covered a wall. Humans were examining a green circle on display, with a rotating line and labeled angles. Data feeds were also listed there, which led me to conclude it was a sensors equivalent. Navigations was at the front, at least from the appearance of several control columns. Some predators appeared to be acting as officers or supervisors, peering over others' shoulders and issuing commands.

This isn't that dissimilar to a starship, but where is the viewport? How can they see?

I cleared my throat. "Sir, where is the viewport? There's no windows!"

"We don't need windows," Fournier explained. "We use sonar, because sound travels further in water than light. Glass or transparent materials are just a weak point in the hull, and a potential source of leaks if we take a hit."

"Okay. Then why did the submersible craft we took here have windows?"

"Because it needs to be a spacecraft too, and you need to see when you're flying. It's useful enough to outweigh any concerns," Carlos chimed in.

"This is so cool!" Onso bounced on his digitigrade hindlegs, and the commander fortunately didn't take offense to his excess excitement. "The sonar doesn't need to see at all. It just…*listens*."

Fournier nodded. "Precisely. I saw you examining the bearings on our machinery, and I'll impress upon you the importance of noise reduction down here. We keep everything detached from the hull frame to avoid vibrations…even dropping a wrench can give you up to an enemy. Sonar receptors pick up the slightest vibration, and then, they know you're there."

"That explains why your engines have to be so quiet. I was reading about how you try to avoid cavitation…you know, where the vacuum pressure caused by the propeller makes water boil. The bubbles pop and give off noise."

“You don’t need a rundown at all, Yotul; you already know everything. We have a speed range where we can operate silently.”

I was growing bored of the technical explanations, and Onso, a primitive, was outshining my knowledge to the humans. Perhaps the Yotul was desperate to prove himself as an academic equal, but he didn’t need to prattle on about science like he was reading a textbook. While there were impressive feats of engineering on display here, I agreed with Samantha’s assertion of naval obsolescence. What good was fighting in the water, except in this extraordinary circumstance?

The predators can hide far away from any targets or locations of value forever. How ingenious. They’d be unseen altogether if the other human tribes realized this theater was irrelevant in a war.

I suppressed an irritated huff. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted,” Fournier replied, a curious twinkle in his eyes.

“Respectfully, sir, I do not see the purpose of putting all this time into submarine development, at least for military aims. You’re a spacefaring species, and you’re incredible at ground assaults. What use is it to hide so far away from civilization…from the action? Maybe you sink a few ships that are using an outdated method of moving resources, but I don’t get it. You have better weapons.”

“You really don’t know? To use your word, these ships are masterful predators; nearly undetectable, capable of hearing the slightest sound, and able to surface anywhere in the world. But it goes far beyond that. The destructive power housed here is a hell of a deterrent. That’s why we’d never *actually* trade nukes like ya Feddies thought we did.”

“Nukes? I’m not following.”

“There’s tens of nukes stuffed onto just one of these things. We can hang off the shore anywhere, and fire missiles while underwater. Not that we have to be close to our target; we can shoot ICBMs halfway around the world. You never know where we are, if it’s right down your neck or prowling distant shores. We’re waiting to strike, anywhere and everywhere, with the technology to end civilization itself, even after command is destroyed on land. Obsolete, my ass.”

I gulped with discomfort, wishing I could recede into the ship walls.

That declaration was so calm yet predatorily destructive; there were chilling implications for the extent of human aggression. It suddenly made sense why Earth tribes were intent on sniffing these predators out of the ocean's recesses, and why the subs tried to remain undetectable at all costs. Should the current battle go awry, Talsk could be devastated by an unseen arsenal of epic proportions.

As Commander Fournier took his post, I tried to understand why humans would devise such machinations, for use against their own civilization. The Federation's "irradiated Earth" could've been a reality; these capabilities shouldn't exist in any culture. I didn't understand why my kind-hearted friends would even think of such predatory weaponry. Surely, understanding the apocalyptic consequences of these vehicles should've convinced them not to build them.

My therapist could've elaborated further on the full heights of Terran aggression. Humans didn't enjoy killing, yet they brainstormed and actualized the optimal ways to kill every human in existence? It was a paradox. Perhaps their predator nature factored into their decision-making in a manner they didn't understand. Orders were issued to begin our descent, and for all sailors to report to battle stations. I felt the submersible tilt down, so I tried to clear my head of what the primates were capable of.

I have to believe that they will never actually do something like that… that their goodness will prevail. They didn't snap after Earth, right? I trust their better judgment.

"W-well, if there's really a base at the bottom of the ocean, the Farsul are fucked," I murmured to my posse.

Samantha's fist tightened, as her smirk returned. "I'd say they are."

The numbers on the depth meter continued to escalate, as the submarine navigated the ocean which spanned below us. Locked inside a steel tube with predators, and knowing the potential of its onboard weaponry, my nerves were anything but quelled. The submarines somehow eclipsed even the worst starships in its dastardly capabilities. The Farsul wouldn't be prepared for this predatory contraption, should we stumble across any of their flotilla.

I was glad that the humans were on the same team as me; there was no telling where their capacity for annihilation ended.

Chapter 122

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 15, 2137

I was claiming an unwanted milestone with this voyage; I was certain I was the furthest below water of any Gojid, who hadn't already been dead and sinking, in history. Some predators were monitoring their scanners for the slightest sign of activity, though I was told an entire team was dedicated to sonar monitoring in a separate chamber too. Sitting in a dark room with headphones for hours, with no idea what was happening, sounded awful. The supervisory officials and secondary team here got a much better deal.

Additionally, fire control technicians oversaw guidance systems on the bridge. Most of their work was grounded in electronic and digital concerns. From what Onso had told me, this vessel had underwater missiles which were connected to the ship computer by wires. Once the payload got close enough to the target, an onboard homing mechanism took over.

By watching the various stations, I was beginning to decipher bits and pieces from their screens. Judging by the learning curve, anyone with training in starship sensors could adjust to sonar after a few days, in a pinch. Onso seemed aware of most duties, having studied up on the intricacies; I was grateful for his explanations. All the same, it was of some comfort that Tyler, Samantha, and Carlos were in unfamiliar territory too.

"We're getting close to the presumed location of the Farsul base," Carlos whispered. "There's no telling what they're hiding down here. Maybe it's everything that's been done to every species!"

Onso flicked his ears. "A proper database would help with bringing our culture back, exactly as it was. They're the historian species, so it's a good place to go digging. They have a weapon as great as any Kolshian tech: information. The baseline for every civilization that has ever lived."

"I wonder what they have on humanity. Perhaps one or two things that are true?" Sam snickered.

Tyler pinched the bridge of his nose. “What made them so certain we died in nuclear Armageddon? How much did they hide about us?”

“I don’t know, but my ship’s doctor wrote a paper in an ethics class about why it was morally just to execute you for your aggression. They didn’t teach anything good about you,” I offered.

Samantha beamed with mock excitement. “Wow, what a splendid ethics class, and a rousing thesis by the good-hearted doctor! Meanwhile, our physicians swear an oath to do no harm. I’m glad that prey are so much more well-versed on right and wrong.”

Tyler struck a puzzled expression. “I took an ethics class in college, before I dropped out of that shit-hole to piss off my old man. Best decision of my life. Anyhow, there were some interesting dilemmas they brought up in that class. The trolley problem is about if it’s ethical to ever do harm, but for good, you know?”

“I don’t. What’s the trolley problem?” I asked.

“There’s a train going down a track toward five people. You can pull a lever so it only hits one dude on another path instead. Should you?”

“Why does anyone have to get run over by a train? Did Onso make this garbage up?”

The Yotul flashed his teeth with a growling sound, pinning his ears back against his head. I didn’t see why my question was objectionable; he was the one with an affinity for outdated trains, to the detriment of advancement. The marsupial made a point of lamenting railroad destruction when we first met.

“Oh, fuck off.” Tyler rolled his blue eyes, and raised his hands in exasperation. “Your ethics classes wanted to genocide our whole planet!”

Carlos nodded. “And us predators talk about killing the least amount of people. Even I see the irony.”

“The Federation has no redeeming attributes,” Sam hissed. “Guess we’re gonna get to see Baldy’s real culture soon. Then we’ll know if the rest of the galaxy used to have a brain.”

My spines bristled, at the thought of uncovering the original Gojid culture. While I knew that the Federation committed similar

atrocities as omnivorous and predator races, it was still painful to think of our real history being flaunted in front of me. What if the Terrans could throw past atrocities in my face, and hammer home the fact that a species' empathy wasn't a prevailing factor against cruelty? I couldn't imagine how it felt for the predators to continually defend their past.

If our past culture was depraved, I don't want it rebuilt or brought back. We could've been like Onso's kind, killing our own people over food.

The fact that I was worried about our discoveries meant I'd accepted the ludicrous idea that the Farsul had institutions beneath the waves. Perhaps I trusted the humans too much, but it was a rare occasion when they were off the mark. They'd been a reliable source of information, even if they weren't often forthcoming. I studied Captain Fournier as he presided over the bridge; his words on submarine capabilities left me shaken.

Understanding why the predators behaved with such a laissez-faire attitude toward extinction was a moot point; worrying for them was the emotion I couldn't squash. I knew the three humans from my shuttle were all from different tribes on Earth. If we won this war and peace prevailed in the galaxy, what was to stop the Terran settlements from pointing doomsday weapons at each other again? Would Samantha and Tyler be trying to kill each other?

There were certain crevasses in humanity's history that were like a mirror, when the comparisons were spelled out in plain fashion. However, in this area, I wasn't worried about similarities being unearthed. There was an inherent difference in our species' aggressivity that was evident, given our contrasting sensibilities. It bothered me, knowing that Terrans were not suited to long-term cooperation with each other.

"Can your aggression ever truly sto—" I started to blurt.

A sonar supervisor barked words in a commanding voice, after receiving a broadband communique from her team. "Two matching acoustic signatures, 2000 meters out. We've put a tracker on them and forwarded the data to weapons."

Captain Fournier clasped his hands behind his back. "Two contacts, 2000 meters out. We'll log the sound patterns in our database. Maintain battle readiness and prepare to fire on my command."

With enemy submersibles sighted, the crackpot underwater base theory looked more plausible. Onso's eyes lit up, as the human shipmates coordinated various actions. I could see a security feed of the torpedo bay, where predators were prepared to physically load replacement weapons from racks. The munitions looked massive, even compared to a predator's unyielding frame. Other Terrans were tending to pre-loaded tubes, hooking up communications cables.

The wires do seem a little primitive, but it's stealthy and immune to interference. The predators have extravagant tech, yet it's only used when it's optimal.

Much of the necessary procedures and checks could be done by weapons specialists on the bridge. Captain Fournier growled the order to fire two torpedoes, and fire control ejected the munitions through the muzzle doors. Without a viewport, I could only judge the launch's success from received data. From what I could tell, the twin projectiles were propelling themselves in the wrong direction.

Onso had noticed my confused gaze. "Yeah, they're aimed off-kilter, just at first. Makes it difficult for the enemy to tell where the missile came from…to track it. It's like interfering with targeting on a starship."

The Yotul's explanation proved correct again; fire control routed the torpedoes back on course, after their initial journey. The Farsul submarines were oblivious to the incoming weapons, and with our minimalist noise, they might not detect anything until their vessels were annihilated. The predatory nature of this sneak attack wasn't lost on me. The humans operated unseen, not alerting foes to their presence until it was too late.

The cables were cut once the torpedoes were in seeking range; the warheads' active sonar was inescapable in close proximity. The pings tipped off the exact enemy locations, and allowed last second course corrections. Human engineering was perfect in orchestrating a kill, as I never should've doubted. They'd risen to every challenge hurled at them, from bringing drones into spatial warfare, to shield-breaking missiles. The ocean was an old, familiar hunting ground to them, so this fight was both natural and intuitive.

Sonar screens lit up with bursts of noise, painting a story of metal cracking like a dropped fruit. The power of our munitions

contributed to the explosion's loudness too; that level of energy output was anything but quiet. Stealth was no longer necessary though, with our submarine's proverbial fangs planted in the Farsul's throats. I could imagine the two submerged vessels being spliced into shrapnel, as the detonations clashed against their plating.

Captain Fournier conversed with the sonar supervisor, before turning to the bridge. "Two confirmed kills. Continue on a descent course, in the direction of those ships."

"We go toward them, we'll find the base," I muttered.

Onso wagged his tail. "We find the base, we save the Yotul. We rid ourselves of their influence once and for all!"

Samantha raised an eyebrow. "Assuming they don't wipe digital data or blow up the base, when all is lost. They love scorched earth, lightly suggested by the whole exterminator hoopla. Better destroyed than used by predators."

"You are irony-poisoned." Carlos shook his head lightly. "We get to the Archives, and we find what we can. Even if they wipe servers, who says our techies can't recover it?"

Our submarine descended ever deeper, pressing ahead toward the real Farsul Archives. Talsk's moon was falling above us, and space fleets were clashing around the deorbiting body. All the same, the real battle was a handful of stealth ships here, dishing out silent strikes. We remained vigilant for other enemies, knowing we were close to the base's suspected location. If they spotted us first, then they would have a chance to strike before we could.

Is there any way to defend against an oncoming torpedo, if the Farsul have such weapons? It seems like you never sense them coming, and you can't…look out a window.

Captain Fournier pursed his lips. "Sweep the area with an active sonar ping. We need to get a read on the terrain and hopefully, the base's exact location."

The sonar supervisor relayed the orders, and Onso tensed up a little. The Yotul whispered to me that active pings gave away our position, by transmitting our own sound into the water. However, sailing blind into unknown territory could end us crashing, or missing the base altogether. We had to hold our breath, and pray

the Farsul wouldn't pick us up. Their capabilities were unknown, but they must possess listening devices for deep-water travel to be possible.

Knowing that we were more than a thousand meters below water, I didn't want to find out what would happen to us if the ship imploded. It was impressive that it wasn't crushed by the outside pressure already, come to think of it. At this depth, atmospheric pressure couldn't be suitable for land lifeforms. That was a fear I didn't need to dwell on.

The acoustic energy illuminated the terrain for our sightless submarine, allowing the predators to map their surroundings. I listened to the bridge chatter, as they scrambled to classify nearby points of interest. Echo sounding confirmed we were close to the ocean bottom; it was level apart from a few elevation shifts. Deep-sea invertebrates sprouted skeletons on the sea floor, wherever space was available. The most promising sign was a wide area of unusual signal absorption, which was believed to be the base.

As nervous as I was about getting attacked, well out of any sun's eye, it seemed like we'd gotten away with the emitted ping. Perhaps it was foolish to assign human competence to the Farsul. Why would they expect to see other vessels *on the seafloor*, armed with a predator's tech? How could a prey animal even think of using detection methods, which hunted other ships down for making the slightest noise?

The sonar supervisor stiffened. "Torpedo in the water!"

Oh stars. At least the humans had picked up a telltale propulsion system from the torpedo, but that meant the Farsul knew we were here. While there were other UN submarines en route, none were flanking us or backing us up. The predators better have some insane defensive tactics, or we would wind up in a million pieces. I didn't like the prospect of my lungs being crushed.

"Brace yourselves for inbound munitions!" Captain Fournier growled into a microphone. "Return fire toward the source."

The Farsul submarine was patrolling just shy of the Archives base, and wasn't, to our knowledge, joined by any comrades. While taking immediate defensive steps, the Terrans dubiously focused on getting their own torpedo into the water. Skepticism marked itself on my face, but Onso leapt to the predators' defense. The Yotul

claimed this counterstrike was to prevent the enemy from firing again. I could feel my heart crawl into my throat, as our own projectile was spit back with haste.

Our submarine reoriented itself in the opposite direction, away from the base, and fled at maximum speed. The incoming torpedo had the edge in speed, so it seemed futile to run away. I guessed that the munition had limited fuel; even so, its tank wouldn't run dry quick enough. We dove as close to the seafloor as we could risk, and the sharp descent almost made me tumble down the bridge.

The Farsul's torpedo was gaining ground, threatening to sink us. Captain Fournier, just like his counterparts in the stars, was cool under pressure; he waited for the munitions to lock onto us. The bearded leader shouted for a sonar decoy to be deployed. As the deceitful device jetted away, I squinted for clues on nearby screens. Per Onso, it unleashed a cloak of bubbles and jamming frequencies, scrambling the missile's sonar-seeking systems.

"Did it w-work?" I wrapped my claws around Carlos' arm with the bear tattoo, remembering not to cling to Samantha again. "I hate water. I'll take death by vacuum any day."

Carlos squeezed my paw awkwardly. "I don't know if it worked. We always hope for the best, but no combat situation is a guarantee. Just breathe, buddy."

Our submersible attempted to skirt the torpedo's search area, while it was hung up on the false targets our decoy provided. We veered well off to the side, and ensured absolute silence. The *Deep Core* looped back around, tiptoeing past the range we'd been chased from. There was no sign of an inbound contact following us. I realized we had successfully fooled the munition's homing logic; I released Carlos' arm at last.

Perhaps it had been wise of the Terrans to impart a shot back. Our foes were too preoccupied to send more trouble our way; one torpedo was enough.

Those thoughts reminded me that we had taken offensive actions to counter theirs. Sniffing out the vessel that attempted to sink us was a priority. The torpedo we'd fired at the Farsul submarine hadn't found its mark, as the enemy managed to pull nifty evasive maneuvers. However, their engines stirred up ample noise, with that sudden haste. Though they had avoided our first missile, I

thought we had a clear target for our next round.

However, it was not necessary to expend another weapon on this nefarious submarine. The Terran torpedo missed its target the first time, but it doubled back for another pass without warning. On the second attempt, it struck true into the hapless Farsul's frame; another hostile was ravaged in the blink of an eye. The humans had a perfect sinking score, proving themselves to be the more devious prowlers.

I doubted the Farsul expected anyone to get this close to their lair; all we had to do was poke at their defenses from a few angles. If this mop-up was representative of our disparate power, the other UN submarines must be closing in on the base too. In space, losses and hardships could be inflicted upon the predators. However, land and sea appeared to be their chief dominion, where their exceptional talents put them miles ahead of the competition.

The oceanic path to the Farsul Archives had been cleared, and soon, humanity might begin to reclaim the actual history of the multitude of Federation species.

Chapter 123

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Space Corps*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

The infected predators were whisked out of the research station, and away from the Battle of Mileau to be isolated in quarantine. The Kolshians had been holding the inner sanctum of the system, since the human fleet was mainly composed of Duerten allies. With the goal of a cured Terran race making itself evident, sending rescue teams for the Dossur prisoners was inadvisable. That would need to await proper biohazard gear, which would take days, if not weeks, to arrive.

Earth was making preparations for itself and its colonies to counter "bioterrorist" measures. Marcel wanted nothing to do with me, during our ride to the quarantine station. The cured humans would be kept isolated for study, until they determined whether the disease was communicable. Initial observations didn't suggest transmissibility through close contact, though it wasn't clear if other means could spread the virus. All of us relinquished blood samples for a scientist team to peruse.

Tests were run to determine the extent of the allergic reactions, and doctors came prepared to treat anaphylaxis. My bloodwork was the only one that came back allergen-free; it had been determined that the human-tailored bioweapon couldn't cross the species border to other sapients. As such, I didn't have to worry about any modifications to my genome, and I was free to leave at any time. The medical staff became primarily Zurulian too, after this development was confirmed.

Nobody has brought up my execution of the Kolshian prisoner, but it's a matter of time. Has Marcel not been feeling well enough to raise the alarm?

Concern for the redhead was the reason I hadn't vacated the facility; no matter what, having him in this situation strained my heart. I wandered up to a Zurulian medic, who was conversing with a human in biohazard gear. The quadruped swiveled around, and his face jogged some faint recognition in my mind. Had I seen this individual before? No, what mattered was discovering how Marcel

was holding up, since my…former best friend wouldn't speak to me.

"Slanek!" the Zurulian announced. "Just the Venlil I was hoping to find. When I heard you and Marcel were among the infected, I had to come."

I leaned my head back. "We *do* know each other. You were there, at the battle of Earth. Helping to save his family. Your name is…"

"Wilen. You might remember my wife, Fraysa, too. We wound up living on Earth after the war, sharing notes on human and alien physiology with top experts."

Fraysa ducked out from within a cabinet. "The Zurulian exchange program was a great way to get to learn what the predators are really like! They don't deserve this. I understand how close you were with your human, Slanek. Mine is into gardening—*gardening,* for fun! A predator."

I don't give a shit. We met for about an hour, months ago; we're not friends.

"Cool." My tail twitched with irritation. "Could you guys tell me how Marcel is doing?"

Wilen squinted. "You haven't asked him yourself?"

"Oh, of course I have! I just mean from a doctor's perspective—what's going on biologically. I'm worried, and I wouldn't want to ask in front of him. You might not be as straightforward if it's bad news."

"Walk with me. I have to deliver these fever-reducing medicines to the sick ones," Fraysa replied. "The short version is, the virus inserts DNA into the human genome, which induces desired immune reactions to specific meat-based proteins and enzymes. The severity varies from person to person."

Wilen trotted after his wife. "I was just talking about Marcel's bloodwork; I want to help him. What Fraysa is saying, is that some humans may only react severely to meat and egg foods. Others are more sensitive to lesser things they eat, like animal lactation, boiled animal tendons in gummies, or even things they wear like cured hides."

"They put *what* in gummies?!" I shrieked.

"I thought you knew."

“Forget it, Doctor. How does this relate to Marcel?”

“Marcel’s blood shows signs of an especially sensitive reaction,” Fraysa commented. “It could be because he’s vegetarian, so some of the proteins are particularly foreign to his body.”

Wilen pawed at a semi-circular ear. “I’m sure you don’t like to think this about your friend, but predatory items pervade human culture, far beyond diet. His furniture and his clothes are probably animal-sourced. Their medicine, a nurturing field by definition, is no longer safe to him; he won’t be able to get egg-based vaccines. I was informed by a human colleague that even cosmetics for dry skin and shoe polish might be off-limits.”

“Treatments for dry skin trigger the cure?” I blinked in confusion, unable to believe the predatory items ran that deep with my human. “Why?”

“Because of a wool grease called lanolin. Look, he’s going to need to be very careful. Our simulations suggest extreme cases like Marcel can’t even breathe the vapors of cooking meat, without triggering anaphylaxis.”

Fraysa slipped a pill packet under a door. “Wilen and I were shocked, realizing how deep hunting runs in the fabric of human society; it’s almost better not to know. What do you think should be done, dear?”

“I think it might be best for Marcel to live on a Federation world, if he needs to avoid animal products altogether. Maybe you could offer to take him in, Slanek, on Venlil Prime?”

My legs locked up, and left me unable to follow the Zurulian medics. Wilen and Fraysa whirled around, noting the shock on my features. Since Marcel didn’t consume meat in the first place, I figured the cure wouldn’t affect his daily life at all. It was within my knowledge that he ate some “animal products”, such as the revolting lactation juice Wilen mentioned, but I figured those could be cut out of a diet too. It wouldn’t be that big of an adjustment, given that my human already avoided them around me.

But now, I realized something as simple as his slick couch, in his Earthly home, would induce the allergic reaction. Marcel couldn’t go to social events with other humans, if breathing in the scent of flesh would place him in jeopardy. That would’ve precluded

hanging out around Tyler, or being in the service at all! The vegetarian's military days were over; it didn't seem fair that his ordinary life was ruined too. Shit, if he got sick, he couldn't seek some treatments at a Terran hospital anymore.

Poor Marcel will have to think of every little thing, as small as treating chapped lips in the winter. If he stays on his world, I don't know how he can go out in public without risk…but he certainly doesn't want to live with me.

I pinned my ears back, searching for an excuse. "Marcel has family on Earth. He has a life there!"

"It will be…difficult, for his predator relatives and friends to accommodate him. They'd need to be very cognizant," Wilen said. "I'm not pressuring you to do anything you don't want to. But if you care about him, you need to tell him what staying on Earth means for him."

"He could wear some breathing mask…and a contact suit?"

Fraysa scrunched her nose. "Maybe, but does he want to do that every day of his life? It's a rough situation. Though there is good news, Slanek."

"What, that he's not dead?!"

"I'm sorry you're so upset. But the good news is, for the air-transmission version, there might be hope of reversing the cure in the near future. The humans have their own gene-splicing systems, such as CRISPR. This incident helps them understand the general principles of what the cure adds, so it might help them identify unnatural edits in other species too."

"I don't care about other species! They don't want it undone, I can fucking tell you that. Marcel does!"

"Well, the humans might be able to undo his gene edits, with proper study. If he chooses to stay away from Earth, it might only be for a little while. His normal life might be restored in a few years…maybe months. Terrans are quick studies."

Hearing that the predators could figure out a reversal, without outside assistance, alleviated my guilt for killing Navarus. Clearly, we didn't need any of the prisoners alive to undo the damage. Besides, there were more captives, like the scientist my friend had brought in, who could provide the information Earth sought. That

demonic Kolshian, who laughed at the idea of destroying Terran culture, deserved a bullet to the head. Marcel was unreasonable, but other humans might be more rational. Maybe I was fretting over one man's skewed morality.

I chewed on what the Zurulian doctors imparted. "You qualified the hope of reversing the cure as being for the airborne version. Does that mean the other humans, from the research station, are incurable?"

"We didn't say that, but the injected-serum is much harder to cure," Wilen proclaimed. "I think that's why the Kolshians favor that method, when given a choice. They transmit the virus directly into the bloodstream, and *also* inject certain proteins and enzymes into the skin…to spark allergies the old-fashioned way."

"I see. So they're permanent herbivores."

"Permanent's a strong word, Slanek. Curing the genetic side would prevent the disease from being passed to offspring, at least."

Fraysa flicked her ears. "Besides, I expect you would know, as a vegetarian's friend, even if those people are eating grass…humans are still violent predators. The Kolshians succeeded in pissing them off, not gentling them."

"Right! What makes them human is that they're insane," Wilen remarked. "So, my Venlil buddy, are you able to break the news to Marcel for us? He deserves to know right away, and it would be better coming from you. A friend."

"Well." My throat clammed up with guilt, not wanting to reveal our relationship's dire straits. Selfishly, all I wanted was to see and comfort Marcel during this revelation; I could brainstorm a plan to ease my entry into his room. "Yes. I'll tell him."

"Excellent! Well, his door is right here; I'll leave you to the unpleasantries."

My eyes widened with alarm, as the Zurulians pushed me through a plastic isolation flap. It hadn't occurred to me that the conversation's timetable would be accelerated; I hadn't realized we were walking past Marcel's room, while I was distracted worrying about him. Wilen and Fraysa watched with expectancy, giving encouraging ear flicks. Nausea twirled in my belly, as I didn't dare explain what happened between us.

My paw issued a tentative knock, before I twisted open the sealed door. The red-haired predator studied me with lethargic eyes, perspiration lining his skin. He shifted on the bed, and curled his lip with displeasure. A booming cough racked his body, causing him to fall back against the pillow. A pitcher of water had been nearly drained; he hadn't been able to get up to refill it at the filtration sink.

"Hi Marc," I offered.

A low groan came from his mouth. "Go…away."

"Please, let me get you some water. I can't leave you like this."

I scurried over to the pitcher, feeling my heart rate hit an all-time high. Chiding myself not to drop the glass and look like more of a fool, I carted it over to the spout. The water filled the jug with the speed of molasses, and my tail swished across the floor with impatience. Temptation overtook me, so I risked a glance at Marcel. The human's face looked puffy; it was clear his immune system was in overdrive.

I wish that I could curl up next to him, and make him feel better. I miss having such a wonderful friend.

Those hazel eyes struggled to stay focused on me, which caused sympathy to tug at my heart. I balanced the full pitcher with new determination, pressing it to his lips. The rift between us felt palpable, as Marcel reluctantly accepted the hydration for his own sake. Even in his discombobulated state, I could see that he hadn't forgotten what I did. Fury was causing him to distance himself from me; I got the sudden feeling my lie had been what pushed him over the edge.

"I was asked to tell you something, by the Zurulian doctors," I spoke hurriedly, while setting the pitcher down on the table. "Your reaction to the cure is severe. The doctors don't think you should live on Earth for a while. They said you'd be deathly allergic just smelling meat or touching animal products…like apparently, your couch. Which I slept on."

Marcel didn't speak a word. Even in his listless stupor, his binocular eyes managed to level me with intensity. I noticed a slight lump pass down his throat; he was either swallowing down hurtful thoughts or thirst. The human, who'd become the faithful friend my

world revolved around, just wanted me gone. That stung worse than the prickle of a thousand thorns, but I was glad we hadn't quarreled again.

With legs that felt as heavy as stone, I trudged toward the door. It was impossible not to feel the predator's gaze boring into my spine. His judgment punished me, as if he were the aggrieved party in the Navarus execution. Part of me was angry about the Terran's mandatory policy on mercy, but I couldn't berate him in this sorry state.

At the end of the day, I cared about Marcel. What I said to him back on the research station was accusatory and less-than-kind, though it was true enough. If this was the last time we ever spoke to each other, I didn't want to cut contact with hurtful words. Perhaps he could learn to remember our adventures with some fondness, in time. This hadn't been how I wanted our close-as-brothers bond to fizzle out.

"I'm sorry that they did this to you." I kept my back turned to the human, resting a paw on the door handle. "You remember why I joined the exchange program? I read your book, *Frankenstein*. About a monstrosity who only wanted a friend…or acceptance, and was hated and abused by the world. Judged for his appearance."

There was nothing but silence from the human, and the certain feel of his watchful gaze. Without looking, I could feel the dazed rhythm of his blinks. How had I ever feared that Marcel would harm me? He couldn't dole out punishment to the people that deserved his wrath, let alone to anyone he called a friend.

"I felt sorry for the creature. For you. And maybe, in some weird corner of my brain, I was curious what it was like to be a monster," I continued. "Now, I know that I am one too; just not one of appearances. Maybe the book was trying to say that the real monsters were the ones who wronged the physical monster. I hope you'll find someone who sees you for what you truly are, because I can't do it anymore."

My paw cracked the door ajar, and I slumped my shoulders in the entryway. This went against everything that my heart desired, pulling away from the only person I thought I truly knew. The reality was that I had changed too much; Marcel didn't sign up to be partners with someone he saw as a monster. If I could go back to

how things used to be between us, I would. Now, I had nobody to turn to.

A faint growl rumbled behind me. “That whole plot you saw was bogus. The real ending…of that book. Not the censored one the UN doctored up. Do you know what it is?”

My head whipped around. “What? You changed it?”

“Of course we did. It’s a vengeful story, not one where Frankenstein’s monster is innocent and lives alone with another of his kind. The real tale? Suffering immensely from rejection…the creature strives to take everything from his creator that he ever loved. After the death of his maker occurs, the wretch commits to end his own life of unhappiness in turn.”

“That’s…” My blood ran cold, as I tried to decipher what lesson such a story could tell. That was in stark contrast to a story that garnered sympathy from the viewers; it proved the point that the monster *was* a monster! “I don’t understand.”

“Humans changed it because we wanted you to take the message that we could be friends. We weren’t trying to vow vengeance for our rejection then. But maybe we should’ve left the message that there are consequences, for such inhumane and callous treatment of a ‘monster.’ It’s fitting, in hindsight.”

“That doesn’t sound like something you would say…Marc.” I took one hesitant step back toward the Terran, and noticed that he had averted his eyes. “You never want consequences.”

“Fuck, you think I don’t want the bastards to pay for all of these horrible things? I have…suffered plenty too. You seem to forget.”

“Then why…why do you let every bad person we come across get away with everything?!”

“I don’t. Read the book, and maybe you’ll understand. Here…I’ve had a copy in Venlil-script on me, ever since I knew you liked it. I wasn’t sure about giving it to you, but now I am.” The human rummaged through a satchel near his bedside, and weakly held it out with a hand. I inched closer, pulling it from his slender fingers. “There’s also a lesson for the monster in there. In his revenge, the monster damned himself too. I know from Sovlin that that was almost me.”

“I lied to you. Can we ta—”

“No. Come back when you’ve finished the book, and then, we’ll talk. I…need to rest. And process my family’s future.”

My tail flicked in a gesture of acceptance, and I plodded out of his quarters with a lighter heart. Marcel didn’t sound as angry; his voice was choked with tiredness, but his hatred had evaporated. Perhaps the human didn’t have the energy to project his grudge, though I wasn’t going to complain if that was the reason. It must be a lot for him to reckon with, learning how the cure would wreck his entire life. He still hadn’t complained or exploded with emotion.

I have no idea how he really feels, but I guess I’ve started to assume he doesn’t experience hate. He’s just always so…moral.

My claw traced the cover of the real *Frankenstein*, wondering how it could apply to my own feelings of monstrousness. Maybe I was ready for the lessons humanity hadn’t wanted the Venlil to absorb in the beginning. I had fallen far enough to heed teachings meant for the more depraved minds among predators. Regardless, I was curious to see what the full narrative held in its pages. If this was a slight chance to salvage my friendship with Marcel, it was a no-brainer to seize it.

Chapter 124

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

Presiding over thousands of Arxur rebel ships, I found myself in a more familiar role than managing intrapersonal relations with social leaf-lickers. The Kolshians towed a sizable force of their own, and our sensors were able to confirm they were following us into Harchen territory. Secretary-General Zhao's proclamation that the enemy possessed drones was eye-opening; we needed to catch up technologically, if we wished to contend with the main powers. The Dominion didn't truly want to win, so they were content to remain stagnant.

This command ship is only a support ship, so it's not a proper front-line war vessel. What's important is that I'm in the thick of things and calling the shots.

Fahl was guarded by human encampments, who were unflinching as we warped into real space. I conversed with a UN commander briefly, before patching our forces into one comms channel. The pack predators were masters of coordinated action, and it would be useful to hear their insights during the battle. The Terrans were the only race that wanted to end the war, as proven by the Dominion and Commonwealth teaming up to keep the fray going. I was pleased to be fighting alongside the primates at last, for the first time since I saved Earth.

It had taken half a day's travel to reach the Harchen homeworld, after mobilizing the rebel forces in a rush. The enemy possessed faster warp engines than us, so their emergence would be shortly behind our own. We couldn't stop without committing to a fight, and that meant my team needed to stay on duty. Kaisal was growing cagey, stuck around Felra and the chatty humans. On the opposite paw, Olek and Lisa looked a little nostalgic, looking out the window toward the occupied planet.

"I spent a lot of time here researching whether the Harchen dabbled in AI. Humans have had AIs that could write songs and poetry for over a century," Olek remarked. "Someone had to come up with

something more…a true, sapient AI!"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "You don't think it's already been invented at home?"

"It's unlikely. Meier would've used it to interface with the Feddies if so."

"I knew Elias Meier, and he did not seem the hiding type." My nostrils flared, as I strained to tolerate the scruffy conspiracy theorist. "The Kolshians are closing in on us, with the intent to eliminate everything we've worked for, and you're spouting your nonsense, Olek?"

"Yeah. Would you rather I say we should get our wills in order?"

"'Wills?' I do not follow."

"Your last will. You know, the document stating what you wish to be done with your assets after your death."

"Why the fuck would you care what happens to your belongings after you die?! You can't use them or gain from it."

"Because the people you love are still there, and you want them to be taken care of after you're gone. If I die in battle, my meager credits are going to a Venlil foster mother who adopted a human. That's the kid I mentioned earlier, you know, and I still want him to succeed in a world where I'm not around."

Lisa offered a solemn nod. "My possessions are to be divided among my family. I recorded a message for them to see…if I'm KIA."

"Hss! Love this, care that. You humans wish to talk others' ears off even after you're dead?" Kaisal hissed. "You won't see them receive it. It's not like they can send a response to your decomposing corpse!"

I raised my snout diplomatically. "Unlike most Arxur, humans are upset at a loved one's passing. Irrationally so."

That applies to me, first realizing I was defective by mourning my parents' death. I see the humans' points about wills; I'd want my Dossur friend to be okay in my absence.

"You would be upset if I…died, right, Siffy?" Felra asked from my shoulder.

"No, I risked everything to save you because I didn't care if you

died." Sarcasm dripped from my voice, and I focused on some last-minute battle calculations. "You know that answer. You just want me to fawn over you like a human."

"Maybe I do. We're about to go to war. I'm…a m-mechanic. The fighting at my research station was scary enough."

Kaisal gave an audible scoff, picking up on the rodent's stutter. I had an inkling that the scrawny advisor would latch onto this as proof that all herbivores were frightful animals. While I wanted to show solidarity with Felra, just to spite the bigoted Arxur, displaying empathy didn't come naturally to me. How did other sapients express understanding of fear? The only response I was familiar with was mockery.

Tensions brewing minutes before combat was less than ideal, regardless. Lisa eyed Kaisal warily, while Olek minded his own stomach. The human fished a stout stick of meat from his pocket, which he had to be forceful to tear with his flat teeth. Felra gasped, and I only then remembered how the Federation abhorred this. Scaring my Dossur friend worse than avoidable was the last thing I wanted; my job was to protect her. The previous time she tried to observe us eating meat, it culminated with her puking, despite sincere efforts at tolerance.

"*Oleksiy Bondarenko.* Don't you dare consume flesh in front of Felra!" I snarled.

The human stopped mid-bite. "Sorry. Wasn't thinking. Let me just wolf it down real quick, so it's gone?"

A growl rumbled in my chest, as the UN soldier turned his back to hide the jerky. Felra leapt from my shoulder, making me wince at the sizable drop for her small legs. I assumed that she was fleeing from what was an atrocious sight in her culture; while I bore witness to herbivore reactions before, I never cared to understand their primal feelings. Avoiding the subject recently was one of my prouder judgment calls. I'd eaten meals alone, sending the humans to their own quarters too, to keep carnivory out of the Dossur's eyes.

I make sure that she has everything she needs, but I know enough to keep our nutrition processes separate. It's better that way.

Felra couldn't run off too far, so I tailed her with purposefully slow

movements. Kaisal's dilated pupils tracked the rodent, as she skittered over Olek's boot. The Arxur's hunting drive must be triggered by the fleeing prey; I was close enough to intercept my advisor if needed. Rather than running past the conspiratorial human, the Dossur had parked herself atop his laces. Her whiskers twitched, and she stared up at the jerky stick.

"Can I…" Felra's eyes twinkled with uncertainty, and she paused for several seconds. "Can I try that, Olek?"

The brown-haired human spit out his mouthful in shock. "WHAT?"

"Can I try your flesh meal? Unless it's an affront to steal your feast."

Despite the impending battle, I was utterly distracted by the unfolding scene. My maw was slackening with disbelief, and I replayed what Felra just asked. The Dossur were natural herbivores, not a cured race; herbivores licked leaves. That was the Dominion's entire basis for considering them non-sapient! Why would the rodent want to consume something so taboo, and out of her diet's bounds?

Lisa and Olek, having spent months around Venlil and then Harchen, both seemed to be having difficulty processing Felra's request. They must have familiarity with the typical Federation response to meat-eating, which was to decry it as an abomination of nature. Kaisal looked like he was about to burst at the seams, wheezing from a lack of breath. His eyes fixed upon the Dossur like she was a defective of her own right.

"Why?" Olek managed.

Felra swished her little tail. "I'm curious. There must be a reason you ignore what carcass-food is, when you're capable of eating plants."

The male human shot a glance at me. While I wasn't violent, I think both the primates understood that anyone who was a threat to Felra would find themselves on the wrong end of my claws. Uncertain of myself, I gave him a slight nod of approval. The Dossur's reaction tickled my own curiosity, though I was worried she would puke it up. It never crossed my mind that she'd want to try meat, let alone learn to tolerate seeing it.

Lisa interceded. "Hold on. She doesn't have the enzymes to digest it. It won't kill her without the allergy, but we don't want to make her

sick."

"Good point." Olek inspected the side of the stick he hadn't bitten from, and snapped off a small morsel. "She's also tiny, so I'll give her a teensy bite. Here, Felra."

The Dossur rose to her hindlegs, grabbing the piece. "Thank you for sharing. I…I hope this will help me understand predators better."

"Why are you wasting your rations, human? Food is too precious to throw away," Kaisal hissed.

Olek raised a nonchalant eyebrow. "Even so-called herbivores eat meat on Earth. I don't see the issue."

"It's prey! It can't eat real food; it *is* the food."

Fury surged in my heart like a wave in a tempest. I launched myself at Kaisal, feeling my blinding temper get the best of me. The scrawny Arxur was slammed into the sensors console, which indicated that the Kolshian force was less than a light-year out. However, the perils of combat meant nothing compared to someone calling Felra food. I thrashed my tail against his own, eliciting a crack from the bone. My fangs brushed against his throat, and traced their way down his windpipe.

"I…hrr…will kill you. This is your final warning," I growled. "I told you never to speak to her like that again. And you said you'd do whatever I said when you took this role!"

Pain laced Kaisal's pants. "I misspoke."

"You sure as cruelty did. Insolence is inexcusable for my underlings; you can thank the 'prey' for you getting one last chance. Don't make me make *her* see what I'll do with your corpse."

"I won't, Your Savageness."

I released the Arxur, who barely suppressed a yelp as his fractured tail smacked the floor. There would be no medical treatment for Kaisal, when the wounds were intended as punishment. I didn't want to follow Betterment's execution policy, but I'd lose control of my people with too much leniency. Besides, Felra's welfare was an area I didn't take any risks with; there would be no mercy when she was disrespected.

Olek looked at me with wide eyes. "Are you good?"

"I expected a more loyal, obedient second out of a defective; that's

all," I huffed. "Sorry, Felra. Assuming you still want to, you can eat your…gift from the human."

"Uh, unless he's gonna wall slam me if you don't like it?"

"I will most likely not. I do not wish to scare off humans when I need your alliance. Is that not obvious?"

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "You like us. Admit it."

"I tolerate you. I cannot cause bodily harm to you at will, even when you call me a 'softie.' As pleasant as it would be to disprove this notion, Zhao would notice your absences if he checked in."

"Uh-huh. Sure, big man. Meanwhile, you let Felra believe you were human, because you 'wish you were one of us.' Your words."

"Hss, for what it's worth, I wish I was human as well," Kaisal offered, with a sour note in his voice. "To have the luxuries you take as guarantees."

"That is what we are fighting for, unless you've forgotten," I spat. "Regardless, I will not harm the leaf-licking primates unless they endanger Felra."

The Dossur dismounted Olek's shoe. "So I'm good to go. Here goes nothing?"

Felra was holding the jerky like it burned to the touch, but slowly brought it closer to her face. Summoning her courage, she managed a tiny nibble. The Dossur passed the predator food around in her mouth, and her eyes rolled back with thought. It was surprising that she didn't spit it out at once. In fact, she swallowed it down without gagging.

That's something I never thought I'd see an herbivore undertake, without being tortured into doing so. It must be a big deal to Felra; even the humans look like they're watching history.

I resisted an odd urge to collect her. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I really want you to pet me," Felra shot back.

"You little…I defended your honor, and now I try to be nice and care about you. After all that, you rehash this degrading nonsense to rile me up? Be gone, rodent!"

Kaisal's eyes lit up. "You want the, um, rodent gone? May I remove the Dossur through the airlock?"

“What? No! I don’t actually want her gone, you unworthy runt!”

“But you just said…I don’t follow. Sorry.”

“Read the room,” Olek chimed in. “Isif says he wants her out of his sight, or that he‘s regretting not leaving her at Mileau, at least once a day.”

Lisa nodded. “And means the opposite.”

Felra skittered over to her water saucer. “To answer your question, Siffy, I feel okay; the taste was very strong, and it lingers. The texture felt phony. I don’t know if I like it, but I think it’s best to wash it down.”

Having been distracted long enough by the deranged Dossur, I resumed my watchfulness for the Kolshians pursuing us. It seemed doubtful that the UN forces padding our ranks would deter them from snuffing us out. An Arxur seeking peace was the worst thing that could happen to the Federation; in Nikonus’ eyes, it surpassed the damage that human benevolence had done to their goals.

Olek and Lisa found their posts in the nick of time, readying themselves to pass along relevant insights. Kaisal nursed his wounded tail, and verified that our assets were ready for action. Commanding an entire fleet did seem easier with multiple sets of eyes, rather than making decisions without any assistance. I hopped away from my post for a brief second, scooping Felra up. The Dossur had been keeping her distance, to avoid distracting me.

“They’re almost here! You need to focus,” the Dossur said. “You don’t want me to stay out of your f—scales?”

I sighed. “You’ve never been in space combat. I wouldn’t want you to be scared alone. We are in this together, yes?”

“You’re so sweet, Siffy. Together.”

Thousands of enemy ships were ripped from subspace, as they encountered humanity’s FTL disrupters around Fahl. I prepared to communicate with my forces, and the Dossur perching on my shoulder gave me confidence. For the first time, an Arxur was going to see what the Federation were truly capable of. Two predator species, with a guest herbivore among them, needed the power to overcome the Kolshians. Anything short of absolute victory would discredit my prowess beyond repair.

The United Nations reissued the command to hold our positions, and we waited for the Commonwealth to wade into whatever traps the humans packed around Fahl. After seeing the buffs given to the Sol system, I suspected Terran-made defenses would offer some interesting surprises. Automated Kolshian vessels forged ahead, fearless against any hidden technology. The primates took no actions to prevent them from closing in on the Harchen homeworld and our joint formation.

As an ambush predator, the basic cues screamed trap, although I couldn't figure out the details. It was odd how the Terrans positioned us so deep within their turf; this was proof that Zhao trusted me not to launch an opportunistic assault against the Harchen. However, I was the only non-human party who assessed anything was amiss. The Kolshian fleet continued pushing toward the edge of orbital range, and readying target locks on Arxur-built ships.

"The humans are not doing anything. How sure are we that it's not a set-up? They could be working against us too!" Kaisal barked.

I flared my nostrils. "They're on our side. Whatever they're really up to, it's hiding in plain sight."

"It is." Lisa pointed out the viewport, to the life-bearing world we were clustered around. "More like hiding in the biggest object in sight."

Staring at Fahl's emerald surface and vaporous clouds, many signatures were visible, rising through the upper atmosphere. Standard air defenses didn't climb that high; they were only meant to counter raids and troop landings. A full understanding hadn't established itself, but I cackled when I guessed what the humans were intending. The planet, which was supposed to be a soft target against orbital strikes, was their weapon of choice.

With the Earthborne predators, offense and protection were undertaken in the same breath. Human resourcefulness often impressed me, with their ability to view space strategy from new angles and compensate for their deficits. That out-of-the-box thinking might be all that could stop the Kolshians from crippling our insurgency in its infancy. I hoped that, once the dust settled, this plan would shake out in our favor.

Chapter 125

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

I recalled my first unfiltered research into Earth, when I read what they said about the Arxur. Despite rampant empathy, it was doubtless that they were predators; their history involved dominating their world, and harnessing it to suit their whims. When I understood that the Venlil were considered equals, not a pet or a tool, it required executive judgment about whether Terrans could be an ally. Their social nature was my perfect excuse to cover for their lofty ideals.

Upon reaching the determination that humanity was a predator race, I took it upon myself to read their military doctrines. One adage that caught my attention was, “The best defense is a good offense.” It was exemplified in the Sol system, lobbing asteroids with FTL drives and ambushing the extermination fleet with nuclear weapons. An active, energized attempt to hold the Harchen system was what I expected from Terrans. Watching the UN forces curl up into a ball at Fahl didn’t make sense, until it became clear that this was bait.

Signatures climbed into the upper reaches of the atmosphere, ascending all the way from Fahl. These were surface-to-space missiles, a concept that required pinpoint calculations. To accurately target something in orbit, from the ground, took unfathomable skill. The humans must have been mastering similar crafts for years; the name of the Satellite Wars rang a bell in my head, and I considered asking the Terrans about it. If we were to be future allies, I should have more than passing knowledge of their abilities.

“This is tech from your Satellite Wars, yes?” I inquired. “Do you remember those?”

“That was years ago, before Olek or I were born. We’re 22nd century babies; Generation Eta. I know what they taught us in school, and Olek knows what he’s read on conspiracy blogs,” Lisa answered.

Olek admired the viewport. “I do know the mainstream narrative…I just don’t blindly accept it. They say the conflict didn’t seem that bad; it wasn’t supposed to be a ‘real war.’ We were only shooting satellites out of the sky, and poking at the digital boundaries. Those were just things, not people or places. No soldier ever fired a shot at another.”

“But someone crosses a line, and it escalates. Like a domino effect. Suddenly, you have a nuclear reactor meltdown in Mississippi, and power going off in winter in Shenzhen. South American countries and African trade blocs get roped into embargoes, now they’re on the shitlist. China hits a French satellite by mistake, aiming for a US spy satellite, and now the EU’s throwing retaliation shots.”

“All this to say, yeah, we can snipe things out of the sky, no problem. Surface-to-space missiles can be hidden in the ground, thousands of ’em. The Kolshians come here thinking they’re going to orbitally bomb us and our pretty little buildings, and the planet pulls an Uno reverse card.”

Felra’s whiskers twitched. “And this also functions as part of a missile defense system? Zhao mentioned it at Proxima Centauri.”

“Hrr, the history lesson is *riveting*. Humans call something a war where they didn’t even shoot at each other.” Kaisal’s voice was thick with irritation, though he kept his words civil. “I feel much better about our chances today.”

“Laugh at cyberwarfare all you want. The Dominion and the Kolshians sure aren’t,” Olek said.

“Nor am I. The humans always know more than they should, and it is a benefit to our cause. Kaisal, unless you wish to be social, provide only battle updates.”

Disdain simmered in the Arxur runt’s eyes. “Thousands of missiles in viewport range…Your Savageness. Firing on the Kolshians, not us. It’s a lot for them to intercept at once.”

The warheads continued their flight toward the heavens, white daggers rising from Fahl’s verdant surface. Powerful engines propelled them toward targets, and onboard homing systems kept them trained on hostile Kolshians. Felra tensed on my shoulder, pressing her cheek against my neck. Her side-facing eyes were absorbing the scene from the viewport, as the enemy scrambled to

account for all inbound munitions.

Should I shield Felra from watching the assumed casualties that are about to play out? No, she can exercise her own discretion. She's an integral part of my team.

Knowing how humans operated, I found it hard to believe that this plan was a "one-trick pony", as they said. Missiles barreling down on the Kolshians were a threat in their own right, but they weren't the crushing haymaker Terrans usually had up their sleeve. Lights flashed from the lunar surface, though that was a mere restoration of Fahl's old planetary defenses. Lasers sliced through metal with decisive power, and the Federation enemies didn't dare to approach in view of the moon. That forced them onto a single vector toward our position.

The surface-to-space missiles charged across the void, and the Kolshians deployed a trail of interceptors. Most projectiles were felled by enemy countermeasures, tricked into an early explosion or broken up by outbound fire. The UN fleet snuck in a few lighter ships to toss shield-breaking missiles, but remained adamant in their orders for us to hold formation. I didn't understand what the humans were playing at. If our foes had suffered shield outages and were warding off multiple munitions, wasn't this our time to strike?

"Why are we not launching an offensive?" I snarled into the comms. "We should hit them while they're confused! You've got them reeling."

A human commander responded through a closed channel. "Negative. Please hold your positions, Chief Hunter Isif. Engaging in close-range is not advised at this time."

"Why not? These missiles and laser point defenses aren't enough… not against a thousand vessels. The Kolshians have more advanced tech than anything we've seen."

"We're aware of the Commonwealth's enhanced abilities, so that's why we must coordinate our actions. Resources are limited, and the Arxur rebellion cannot sustain severe casualties. Please, hold on a little longer: we're setting up prime conditions for your fleet to strike, on our signal. We have a plan. We always do."

The Kolshian ships were packing into an aggressive formation, and heading toward our own combined ranks at maximum velocity. The

Terrans wouldn't want to let them have a crack at the vassalized Harchen; there was no way they'd just let the Commonwealth approach. Still, Nikonus' military wasn't composed of oblivious fools. The tentacled bastards saw the markings of a trap, but were arrogant enough to believe they could plow through it. While time would determine who was right, I had sought out the humans' help. Now was too late to question their wisdom.

"All Arxur troops…ready your plasma weapons, but await the humans' signal. Let the Kolshians come to us," I issued the order to my fleet. "They want to take us down, in cahoots with Betterment, and they're in for a rude awakening if they think they can just walk right in here! It's fitting that the two parties responsible for our starvation have shown they're on the same side at last. We will send them crawling back to the hole they came from!"

The Arxur rebellion fleet was comprised of every vessel we could pull from Betterment's side. Rogue captains with their warships, vessels that had stuck around from my original sector force, and lesser transports stolen by defectors fought alongside each other. Smaller craft had also been gifted to us by the United Nations covertly. I could discern design similarities to the Terran armada scattered among my forces; the proportion of our manufacturing that relied on Earth's generosity wasn't lost on me.

We only learned of Nikonus and Giznel's collusion ahead of time because of Zhao's intelligence. That alone was sufficient reason to give them leeway, and trust that humanity could outwit the Kolshians. I disliked placing my fate in another's hands, especially after things had gone awry in the past. My pupils darted to a distrustful Kaisal, who lacked faith in humans after his failed defection to Earth. I then scoured Olek and Lisa, who were poring over data without comment.

The leaf-licking primates didn't arch an eyebrow, despite our forces being seconds away from a head-on confrontation. The Kolshians were already pushing through artificial satellites that drifted in orbit, and would have recovered their shields by the time we met. The missiles launched from the planet had been impressive, but only netted a few dozen kills. The humans cast a second wave from Fahl's atmosphere; I didn't imagine the results would be better. If anything, the enemy knew to expect it now.

This plan is asinine; there's no time to wait for planetary defenses to whittle away at the Kolshians. Maybe the UN has missed the mark here, and are too arrogant to admit their inefficacy.

Felra chittered by my ear. "Humans have a lot of explosives here, Siffy. Is it like this, on all of their worlds?"

"Let me consult the schematics they gave me of all their defenses and contingencies. Zhao hands that information out at public request," I grumbled.

"So you're moody. I'm scared too, but I'm sure these are different missiles than the first ones! They had lots of bombs in their staging system."

"You don't know how to read sensors, rodent. There's no difference between these missiles, and the few thousand in the last wave!" Kaisal spat. "The same fucking make. If you know nothing about battle, leave it to your betters."

"I can learn, Kaisal. I'm just as intelligent as you! But if you admitted that, you'd have to admit to yourself that I'm not food."

"You're not food because S…*Isif* is defec…cruelty-deficient. He takes after humans with the pets. The damn humans are letting us down now, like they always do, because they'd leave any Arxur behind if it saved their skin. I don't trust a weak-minded animal, and I trust these apes even less."

After considering his comments, I decided not to reprimand Kaisal; it might behoove me to revise my strategy for bringing him under my control, if I didn't want to execute him for insolence. Food and opposing Betterment weren't making him cordial. However, what he claimed about the new surface-to-space missiles was true. Sensors backed up his initial claim, that these defense weapons were identical to the first wave. Even I wondered whether the Terrans were losing the thread.

This second wave was showing signs of a targeting glitch, with warheads straying off-course from the Kolshian fleet. I waited for them to veer back onto the correct heading, but many were pointing away from the enemy altogether. If anything happened to my command vessel, Felra would disintegrate alongside me. A protective growl rumbled in my chest, as I looked the Dossur with concern. The risk was unacceptable; the UN failed to deliver, and I

was going to issue orders to siege the enemy.

A sudden explosion appeared on the viewport, away from any Kolshian vessel. That was followed by another payload striking the wrong mark, and then another; the explanation for why the missiles weren't homing in on our opponents presented itself. The moronic Terrans had accidentally lobbed their weapons into Fahl's artificial satellites, in what could only be described as an utter failure of their targeting. Anger burned in my chest, and I wasn't sure I could resist the urge to berate them for incompetence.

I thought I could trust humans; if I'm honest, I admired their inventiveness. The one time I'm depending on them for the future of my species, they shit the bed?!

Fixing a scorching glare at the viewport, I watched a surface-to-space missile take out a satellite. It was ironic, per the now-infuriating history lesson I'd received; taking out orbiting objects was why these weapons existed in the first place. Perhaps its programming hadn't been altered to steer it away from artificial debris. The impacted satellite was ripped into thousands of tiny pieces, which rocketed around the planet's berth like a whirlwind. Most microscopic shards were hurtling…toward the Kolshians.

Shrapnel impaled the oncoming enemies within seconds, puncturing vessels in multiple compartments and crippling important functions. Navigations went haywire following hits to specific hull regions, whereas a lucky blow to the centrally-located drive sent a handful of enemies up in a fireball. The perils were compounded on isolated manned ships, where debris could slice into the bridge and its personnel. Fortunately for Felra's sake, most foes were drones, so casualties wouldn't weigh on her conscience.

"Their automated ships are built for evasion, but how do you evade a wall of debris? No calculation will save them," I mused to myself.

Human command flickered back onto the comms. "Arxur forces, you are a go to engage the enemy. Harass their flanks and target weakened ships. Keep behind the moving cloud of debris."

"Copy that. All Arxur forces, the Terrans have baited vulnerable prey and signaled our opening to pounce. Let's remind these miserable herbivores who the actual hunters are."

"Miserable herbivores?" Felra squeaked, as I switched off the

channel. “Don’t be like that. You can do so much better. I want to see a day where you make peace with…miserable herbivores.”

“‘Miserable’ isn’t a flattering qualifier, nor is it one I use as a blanket term. The Kolshians fit that description, so it is appropriate here. They are not who they say they are, yes? Their deaths will not be mourned by anyone with a worthy opinion.”

Olek chuckled. “Truth. Go get ’em, Siffy boy!”

The arboreal predators migrated from their defensive arrangement, and brought their ships into firing range. Few Kolshians had escaped the consequences of the satellites, which had acted as grenades when they blew apart. The power of a single missile was amplified into a lasting storm, that made our orbital passageway unassailable. The Commonwealth was hellbent on quashing my rebellion, but they didn’t wish to lose every vessel. Enemy ships peeled back, likely having received a command to retreat.

I watched over my fleet, as they snapped up stragglers with deadly vigor. The humans pressed as deep as they could afford to risk; any crippled vessel became an immediate target for the Earthlings. To think I’d been livid with them for a brilliant strategic play. The Kolshians needed to set the terms of their engagements with the United Nations, because they weren’t gaining any traction on prepared Terran battlegrounds. My movement would survive another day, and we owed it to these weaponized defenses. The Secretary-General had earned a humble thanks for his intercession.

“Woohoo! What did I say about calamari?” Olek cheered.

Lisa smirked to herself. “Don’t jinx us. Wait for the last ones to be mopped up before you pop the champagne.”

“Let me gloat a little. Especially after Kaisal said he doesn’t trust us…*apes*.”

The Arxur advisor scowled. “I made the mistake of trusting humans once. Your species’ character doesn’t change because of *one* victory against prey.”

“Shh! You’re tempting fate. Don’t use the word victory until they’re all gone,” Lisa shot back.

“Hrr. No talking is perfectly fine by me.”

It wasn’t a long wait for the conflict to resolve itself, per Lisa

Reynolds' superstitions. The last Kolshian craft were downed or chased from the system within minutes, sent to nurse their wounds elsewhere. I had the presence of mind to commend the humans' efforts, over our shared channel where my command could hear. While the United Nations was not an official ally, this showing renewed my confidence over the impact they could make, when they joined our clash with Betterment. If the rebellion held out long enough, we'd have the most devious predators in the galaxy on our side. That was an unparalleled advantage, in my book.

This sent a message to every Arxur rebel about the competency of our fellow hunters. I hoped the humans would succeed with their quest to topple the Federation, in a hurry. Whatever could be done to curry Terran favor, Zhao must be convinced to back us when his aid was needed again.

Chapter 126

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

The Terrans were well-informed on the base's design, perhaps having obtained blueprints of Farsul underwater mechanisms. Our submarine had glided under the bottom of the structure, which triggered an automatic hatch to unseal. We ascended into a shaft, and it resealed upon detecting the full volume of our displacement. The water drained from the chamber, before a gentle computer voice welcomed us to the Galactic Archives. It was time to take the mantle of authentic history back; I could feel my emotions in turmoil as we geared up.

Tyler, Carlos, and Samantha were wearing full-face respirator masks, along with the rest of the landing party. It was simple to determine through our instruments that we were in a normal pressure, fully-aerated environment, but the Kolshian side of the conspiracy had dabbled in aerosolized weapons. The UN was taking extra precautions to avoid future incidents of cured soldiers. The next attack could be worse than the cure, if they could target specific genomes with diseases.

If the Farsul went to all this trouble to hide the historical cache, there's no telling what we'll find here. We all accept the risks that they could flood or blow it up with us inside, sabotaging the mission.

We disembarked in a hurry, knowing other submersible craft would follow behind us. Giving the Farsul time to destroy evidence or trigger destruct mechanisms was an unacceptable risk. Aliens like myself and Onso were given the choice whether to wear biohazard gear, so I opted not to. What were they going to do, cure the Gojid race again? However, the Yotul, despite belonging to an herbivore species, had donned a specially-fitted mask over his snout.

"Why the garb? Have you been getting flesh cravings from being around Tyler?" I asked.

Onso sucked in a sharp breath. "Nobody is messing with my biochemistry ever again. Though I agree, Tyler eats too much meat for his cholesterol."

Tyler tightened his fingers around a gun. “Judge all you want. I’d rather die than live without a fucking burger.”

“That’s…not a sane thing to say,” I mumbled.

“Well, you’ve never had a burger. Rabbit food doesn’t hit the spot, man.”

“Spare Baldy the gory details,” Sam chuckled. “We got work to do.”

Upon receiving a signal, Terran soldiers pushed out in pairs through a cramped exit door. There were no sounds of resistance from the reception pad, despite the Farsul base’s secretive nature. I sidled up to Onso, and we followed our human friends out into fresh air. My gun was ready in my grip, but no hostiles or personnel were in sight. There was only a modest service door, which could be rigged with traps. Perhaps armed guards were waiting for us to enter the main area, before mowing us down.

With that very suspicion in mind, the humans blasted down the unlocked door with charges. Confusion was evident in their body language, despite the hazard masks and their lack of tails. The peek inside revealed only a library-like lobby, with a lone Farsul receptionist behind a desk. She gasped in surprise, and abandoned all focus on her workstation. If I wasn’t mistaken, her drooping ears were scrunched with some level of unhealed grief.

Are they planning to kill us intruders on sight, and this alien is a rare soul with a conscience? Grief doesn’t make any sense.

“Hello. I am Archivist Veiq.” The Farsul laid her empty paws out carefully, and didn’t flinch as UN soldiers crowded her. “I am the only receptionist on duty, and I will help you find anything you are looking for. All records are stored on physical nodes for security reasons. There are a few staffers on duty in each room, but they are unarmed historians; not a threat to you.”

Tyler, being an officer of Monahan’s ship, took charge of the situation. “Why should we trust you?”

“Us archivists all wish your experiment could have succeeded. We exhausted every avenue, and tried to revive it every so often. I knew a human well once. Danny, his name was. He got…sick, just like you all do. I haven’t interacted with any humans in a while. It’s not worth it, getting attached to a creature with a short life span.”

I blinked in confusion, trying to discern what the Farsul archivist

was referring to. Anything involving human experimentation was not above-board, and the conspiracy's typical aim was to snap predatory habits. Why would this clandestine receptionist have known a human? Why would she care about him getting sick, to the point of showing grief? The Kolshian-Farsul conspiracy treated Terran lives as toys, not viewing them as people.

"Choose your next words very carefully, Veiq. *What experiment*?" The blond officer jammed his gun against her temple, chest trembling with distaste. "Have you captured more of our fucking civilians?!"

The Farsul stiffened. "I assumed you knew. You're not here to learn about your kind's…condition?"

"The fuck are you on about? We came here for your cumulative records, but now you're sure as shit gonna spill what you're talking about."

"It would be easier to show you. Shall I take you to the human room? It's dedicated to your kind's exploits."

"Fine. Don't try anything smart. Go ahead; lead the way."

Veiq pointed with a claw to a swipe card, and slowly reached for it at Tyler's nod. The Farsul walked to a stairwell door, and tapped the plastic rectangle against a scanner. With a beep, the locked barrier clicked open, permitting us entry without use of force. The Terran soldiers were on edge, expecting the staffer to spring a trap at any minute. I didn't understand why she was so compliant yet unafraid.

Tyler kept the gun barrel close to her head, not letting her stray from his guiding touch. A few personnel were left to guard the reception area, as we followed the Farsul blindly. The Galactic Archives appeared to be a multi-level building, with entire rooms dedicated to collecting items and recordkeeping for a sole species. Fishing a visual translator out of my utility belt, I scanned it over various labels. *Krakotl. Sivkit. Onkari. Arxur.*

The last label gave me pause, as I craned my neck to peer into that room. The Krakotl, Sivkit, and Onkari rooms appeared to have a small number of staff from the native species, clearly ones brought into the fold. For obvious reasons, the Arxur's space lacked such inclusions; nobody would be insane enough to employ the savage

grays. Recalling my anger upon learning that Coth's tale was true, I wanted to see for myself any documentation the Federation had of Wriss.

Our priority now was getting to the bottom of Veiq's story about humans; it also interested me what the Farsul knew from their initial observations of Earth. I was uncertain whether the ancient, primitive predators had shown their redeeming attributes back then, during the vicious wars. Furthermore, we could discover the exact details of why they pronounced the Terrans dead, without verifying that fact beyond all doubt.

"Human," Veiq read off a solemn plaque at the end of the hall. "This is the one you want. Give me a moment please."

The human door was different from the rest. It was sealed off by a magnetic lock, which was a step up in security from even the Arxur. The only rationale I could think of was that the Farsul were hiding something about the Terrans' past, that not even their colluders all had clearance to know. What had they seen on Earth that would be that devastating if it got out?

Veiq swiped her card over a scanner, and was given an odd confirmation message. The Farsul ducked her head in forlorn fashion, pushing the entrance open. Tyler shoved her into the room, forging ahead with apprehension. I followed Marcel's friend with hesitant steps, and what I saw almost swept me off my feet. The extra security wasn't about any information they were hiding…it was about species containment.

Audible gasps came from the UN soldiers, as their eyes landed on three humans seated at a desk. The trio didn't look particularly impressive for predators, hunched over holopads with singular focus. I couldn't see any signs of mistreatment, restraints, or coercion. Other than odd plastic clothing, there was nothing out of Earthling norms. A few Farsul milled about as well, though they halted their tasks upon our entry. The Terrans working with the archivists seemed amazed, spotting others of their kind.

"What the…" Samantha murmured.

A gray-haired human walked over with a limp, and startled when gun-pointing and shouting voices greeted him. Tyler ordered the soldiers to round up the other staffers, placing them into kneeling positions. How had Terrans gotten into the Galactic Archives, at the

bottom of Talsk's ocean?! This didn't compute in my brain, but I sure wanted to hear what Veiq's experiment was. Were they trying to turn Earth's people into Federation sympathizers?

Carlos shouted at the silver-domed man who approached us. "YOU! What is your name?"

"George Murphy." The strange human's eyes darted around, and he showed signs of nervousness. "Who…who are you?"

"We ask the questions!"

"Okay, sir. Please don't flip your lid. I…I just don't understand, uh, where you came from. You're human."

"We come from Earth?"

"I know that! Whoa, my golly, is that the United Nations symbol?"

"…yes, that's who we work for."

"Look, maybe I should explain—" Veiq began.

George's eyebrows knitted together. "So they've been hiding spaceships all this time? They really did find a flying saucer at Roswell. God."

"I'm not sure what they've been doing to your mind, but there was no hiding about the FTL tests," Carlos replied. "It was livestreamed everywhere, from Earth to Mars. If you somehow missed that, it was pretty damn hard to miss the raid on our motherland."

"Live…streamed? Mars? Raid? Um, sir, what is today's date?"

"January 16. I think."

"The…the year."

"2137."

George's eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out cold on the floor. Carlos seemed stupefied, as he knelt to lend medical aid. Mr. Murphy's two colleagues bore horrified expressions, slipping into a state of panic as they overheard. I wasn't following what was going on myself, but there was a clear disconnect between these possible captives and current events. Tyler wheeled on Archivist Veiq, a livid expression no doubt lurking beneath his mask.

"What year do they think it is?" the blond human hissed.

Veiq closed her eyes. "I was explaining. We've been working on this

project for centuries, on and off. I'd have to check your files to give specific answers, but we haven't visited Earth since your presumed extinction."

"Our *what*?" a panicked Terran staffer asked.

"That was during the Cold War. A hundred-fifty years ago, at least." Samantha shook her head in bewilderment. "Fuck, this is a new one."

Tyler waved a hand. "Get the three of ours out of here, and to our medical bay. Make sure you screen them for contaminants or contagions before removing your gear."

Soldiers took care with the unconscious George Murphy, and the two other predators were escorted out too. The staffers seemed more agitated than they had before our arrival, with one still demanding answers from the UN troopers. Veiq watched as the strange Terrans were herded out, and her Farsul cohorts were lined up against the wall. The receptionist squirmed under Tyler's glare, breathing a deep sigh.

"I'll tell you as much as I know! So, we visited your planet after hearing your signal broadcasts. We have thousands of hours of footage of you; you can look through it on the mainframe there. Ask any of us for an eye scan to bypass the password, if you want to," Veiq said hurriedly. "I can see that you know nothing about the project."

Officer Cardona leaned toward her with menace. "I better be made to know something in a hurry. If those humans are that old, how are they still alive?"

"Cryosleep. Are…your kind familiar with the concept?"

"Yes. What I'm still not familiar with is the fact that you've been *abducting humans for centuries*."

"When we learned that there was a second predator species, let's say we were concerned. There was a sample size of one with the Arxur, and the cure failed in horrific fashion. We're more the behind-the-scenes types than the Kolshians, so we always get the first test subjects for an operation. We record the information about every species, okay?"

"Go on, Veiq. Tell me exactly what you did to these poor people. To all the people like us throughout galactic history!"

“Easy now. We secretly snatch a few subjects for all meat-eaters. Keep them chilled while the Commonwealth runs their calculations, then begin a few rounds of testing. Despite your high aggression, it would’ve been wrong to authorize a genocide without doing everything we could to save you. Your trials would determine scientifically if the cure could work on a predator…a species that killed on its own.”

I found myself pacing as humans did, resisting the urge to chew my claws. Why had these Terrans been so compliant with the Farsul’s whims, if they were kidnapped? The predators didn’t usually give in so easily to intimidation, and these seemed to be working with minimal supervision. My intuitive feeling was anger, knowing that innocent civilians had been whisked away under every species’ nose. Gojid denizens had this done to them, without a clue what aliens were!

What could random people off the street have done, to deserve being taken away from their lives? This is an atrocity.

Onso seemed appalled too, judging by how rigid his tail had gone. The Yotul must be wondering if his kind had been kidnapped in similar fashion, despite being herbivores; after all, we’d seen Sivkit staff working here, and they were plant-eaters. Knowing the marsupial, I bet he was itching to run off to the Yotul chamber next. It would reveal the stark details of their uplift, and any steps taken to mitigate their uncanny aggression.

“You knew the cure worked on us, and you still participated in the raid on Earth?” Tyler hissed.

Veiq shied away from him. “I’m getting there. We were quite hopeful, when we administered the cure; the humans were all quite receptive to it, at first. They were fine, and we were starting to give the Kolshians a hopeful prognosis for Earth. Sure, the aggression was a nightmare, with you crazy predators resisting beyond what was reasonable…most had to be locked away. We learned with the second batch.”

“You’re talking about humans like we’re a batch of fucking cookies! What was your magical recipe for a tame predator? Drugs? Torture?”

“No, we got them to cooperate of their own free will. It was a matter of not telling them we administered the cure; instead, say

that other aliens had infected them, and we were studying it for their benefit. Scares them at first, but they come around. Then we ask them about their culture, and claim we're studying it for posterity. They'd document anything they remembered quite liberally. They were willing to work with us, despite us being prey…your kind can be rather charming."

"Gee, thanks. Less pandering, Veiq."

"I…meant that. Anyhow, we solved your temperament well enough; humans could be manipulated. Long as they weren't left unsupervised, they wouldn't fight. Our trials were exhaustive, meant to run several years. Years of eating herbivore food, and living the life of genuine sapients! We wanted to believe in you. But when we were about to pass it off to the Kolshians for broader studies, it all collapsed."

"Collapsed? The fuck does that mean? Collapsed how?"

"The subjects started getting sick. Every last one of them, and we couldn't do a thing to stop it. Physical maladies and mental impairments were the lesser symptoms. In some cases, they went insane…hallucinations, not sleeping, depression, deranged aggression, total memory loss. Death occurred on its own, even for the ones we didn't have to put down. We…call it 'The Hunger.' Humans go mad without flesh."

The Hunger? That can't be right. Dr. Bahri says that humans don't have bloodlust or a need to eat animals. Prolonged abstinence would really result in insanity, or hunting outbursts?

Carlos leaned down to my ear. "B12 deficiency. We need that vitamin for neuron upkeep and blood oxygenation. Fucking idiots."

"Now Kolshians were busy crafting a story, trying to explain your, um, eyes. They mistrusted humans, but we'd convinced them you were different than the Arxur," Veiq continued. "So, thanks to our faith, they already announced your existence to the Federation, and the failure threw a wrench in our plans. Time to backpedal. The Farsul ambassador packaged your terrible history, and the Kolshians fed them that instead."

Tyler shook his head. "You painted the worst picture of us possible. Not that we didn't already know that, but…"

"We were buying time, to figure out what went wrong! The

Kolshians agreed to help stall, hence why extermination plans against Earth dragged on for decades. But constant failures with our human experiments weren't acceptable; we'd made no progress. The Commonwealth lost patience, and pronounced you incurable. They also issued a directive to wipe all public knowledge of predators having culture, so no bleeding heart would try curing one again."

"Yet here you are today, trying to fucking cure us again."

"The Farsul felt it was wrong not to cure a curable species. The Kolshians wouldn't even listen to the idea of dropping the cure as a last-ditch effort; it was all straight to killing you! You're alive because of us. We thought we'd find a breakthrough eventually, so we had to continue the work. We spun the tale that you bombed yourselves, and stopped them from wiping you out."

I blinked in confusion, not certain that I'd heard correctly. The Farsul had deceived everyone, including their Kolshian conspirators, in order to perfect the cure against humanity? Meanwhile, their lone subjects were predators who were frozen the better part of two centuries ago. The Terrans survived to the present day because a twisted regime thought they could be molded into herbivores, given time.

From what Carlos told me, if the Farsul figured out the missing mineral, they would've been right.

"Another day, another crazy alien. It always gets better," Samantha whispered.

Sorrow flashed in Veiq's eyes. "So the galaxy proclaimed Earth dead. That lie was a grave error in judgment; we were blinded because we grew attached to the subjects. We still care, even after everything that's happened. But due to perpetual failures, the Farsul came to believe the Kolshians were right; curing humanity was hopeless. We're running out of specimens, but we still raise a small group once every few years. After the Hunger gets the last ones."

"If you think you failed, why didn't you finish us off decades ago? And then, you help attack Earth after we try to join your Federation?"

"The Kolshians would've noticed if we observed or attacked you. They have the shadow fleet, not us; we didn't want to admit we lied. Chief Nikonus was livid when your kind resurfaced, so despite

the wild schemes he tossed around, we joined the extermination fleet to fix our mistake once and for all. You know what the irony is?"

Tyler tensed his shoulders. "I'm sure I'll love to hear it."

"The irony is, now, the Kolshians are the ones who think you can be cured. We told them that it failed back at the time, but they didn't listen to how it all transpired. They wanted a yes or a no on their killing plans. So today, they think they can mold you, because Noah *lied* on Aafa and said you can live on just plants. Nikonus, the old codger, fucking fell for it."

It was almost as if the Farsul was pleased that the humans knew the truth, so they could validate her thoughts on "the Hunger." I would still be reeling from one of her claims, when the next one hit me like a slap to the face; I wasn't sure how to begin processing such stunning admissions. However, having the world I thought I understood blow up around me was beginning to feel familiar. It never became easy, but it was morphing into a manageable sensation.

"Okay. That's…quite enough, Veiq," Tyler muttered. "One last thing. Where are the rest of your human…specimens?"

The Farsul archivist gestured with a paw. "Right this way."

The predator soldiers followed their guide, and I steeled myself for a meeting with primitive humans from their most barbaric times. The ones that greeted us in this room hadn't seemed so violent and uncivilized. Still, I mistrusted anyone who was raised among bloodshed, without the comforts Earthlings enjoyed today. Hopefully, the Terrans were ready for any trouble their awakened kin might stir up too.

Chapter 127

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

The cryopods were in a separate, unmarked chamber, hidden behind a false wall in the hallway. Archivist Veiq rubbed her damp nose, and her drooping ears bunched with apprehension. That Farsul seemed more nervous than when the Terran soldiers busted down her door with guns; perhaps she knew that soldier predators were civilized, informed, and in-control. I considered telling my companions that we should refrain from waking the captives until we had a plan to subdue them. However, the likelihood of offending my human friends deterred me from raising my concerns.

Frost-lined glass covers were draped over the oval containers, revealing placid-looking predators. I squinted for any sign of battle scars; assessing each one's potential threat level would require knowledge of their killing experience. These were humans that desapientized their own kind, so how could we expect them to have the slightest concern for alien lifeforms, like Onso and myself? The Yotul looked unafraid of these primitive Terrans, probably because he was a primitive himself. He didn't understand the critical shifts in Earthlings' morals and behavior over the years.

I count a few dozen humans in stasis, more than the soldiers we have here. This could turn into a stampede or a rampage easily…or they'll have to gun down their ancient civilians.

Tyler waved his barrel at Veiq. "Wake them up. *Unharmed*, or so help me God, I'll kill you."

"Understood," the Farsul breathed. "They're going to freak out."

"No shit! You kidnapped them and put them to sleep for a hundred fucking years!"

"We were trying to save your species—"

"Why don't you worry about saving your own hide? Open the fucking pods, NOW! UN forces, I want every person to take a pod. Reassure these poor souls, be clear and concise explaining what's going on, and get them back to our ship."

The Farsul archivist tapped away at a central control console, eyes glimmering with worry. Carlos and Samantha heeded Tyler's orders, and each found a spot next to a pod. Onso bounced up to a container of his own, inspecting it from every angle with blind enthusiasm. I stood frozen, nervous to be within grappling change of an awoken beast. The Yotul noticed my failure to follow the orders, and gestured with his tail to an unguarded pod.

"Maybe I should sit this one out," I offered. "I'm an alien. That might agitate them, and I don't really know how to handle humans, uh…"

Samantha curled her lip. "Get your ass over there. The least you could do is pretend to care about us, Sovlin."

"I do care about you. But I also know how humans from this time period conducted themselves."

"Is there a problem?" Tyler swiveled around, and exasperation flashed in his icy eyes. "We're the same species now as we were then. I don't expect people I serve alongside to see us as mindless predators."

"Yes, sir. Of course you're not; I'm just thinking of the Federation's dossier of your wars. I reviewed it with Recel when Marcel…forgive me. I'm going."

I ducked my head in sheepish fashion, and scurried within a capsule's proximity against my will. My heart rate ratcheted up, peering down at the snoozing predator. His arms were connected to wires and folded across his unmoving chest. This Terran seemed young, with unblemished skin that was more pale than Tyler's; his mane was a brown fringe that swept past his eyebrows. At least I hadn't gotten a particularly imposing specimen, but a Gojid wasn't cut out to interact with these creatures.

The fog on the glass cleared up, and offered an unrestricted look at the predator's face. The color began to return to the ancient human's skin, and his bluish lips morphed back to a healthy pink. Veiq continued pressing buttons, and stepped away as every pod's lid unsealed. I resisted the itch to draw my weapon; Tyler wouldn't appreciate me holding this primitive at gunpoint. It was important to remember that these weren't the presentable Terrans I had come to love. These were lawless hunters who lived in a harsh society, with few amenities and no knowledge of alien life.

The brown-haired human's chest showed signs of movement, which gradually gained stability. His eyelids twitched, and his nostrils flared. I took an instinctive step backward, uncertain whether he'd try to strangle me. My remaining spines were at full bristle; the sick feeling almost mirrored my first encounter with Marcel. The predator's binocular eyes snapped open, a startling amber hue, and panic flashed in them. He snapped upright in an uncanny motion.

I barely muffled my scream; every impulse in my brain wanted to plead for mercy. His pupils were trained on me, and he seemed equally frightened by my presence. My fear subsided to some degree, as the human shrank away from me. His breathing became panicked, and his hands wrapped around himself in a self-soothing gesture. The predator pressed against the back of the pod, hugging his legs to his chest.

"Oh God." The Terran's unusual eyes welled with tears, and his tone was rich with hyperventilation. Other waking specimens were showing signs of panic attacks, or blindly bursting from their pods. "Oh God. What the fuck?"

Clear and concise. Tell him what's going on, and pray this is a sapient that's capable of reasoning.

"Easy." My words caused his brow to furrow, and he cradled his skull in his hands. That must be his first time acquiring meaning from the translator implant, which the Farsul must've installed after his capture. "I'm here to rescue you. My name is Sovlin…do you have a name?"

"H-hunter." *Oh Protector! His name is literally 'hunter'; these are primitive, predator-exalting humans. But he sounds scared of me, which is odd.* "Where am I? What the fuck are you?"

"You were kidnapped by aliens—er, not me or my kind! There's two precursor races who meddled with lots of primitive cultures…yours, mine. My entire planet got glassed, uh, not that you asked, but I joined up with humans after that. You see all the human soldiers around here? I work for Earth."

"…kidnapped by aliens? I remember camping, and a rustling noise…something sharp hit my neck and…why? What did they do? How can you work for Earth? Take me home!"

Hunter was growing hysterical, and his hands were shaking. I

listened to his sniffling, feeling pity begin to replace my fear. However dangerous this captive might be, it was clear his narrow-minded brain was overwhelmed; the questions he posed were understandable, in light of waking up in a strange place. Hesitantly, I inched toward him, and he tensed up like I was going to hurt him. Why would an apex predator see *me* as dangerous?

The news I was about to break might shatter his world; everything and everyone he knew was long gone. Perhaps showing empathy would convince him not to stampede or show aggression? Hunter deserved some amount of comfort, after what he'd been through. I placed a paw on the shudderingly-named human's shoulder, and brought him into a cautious embrace. He wailed incoherently, sobbing into my fur. His mane and his pink-and-white claws were pristine even up close, to my amazement.

Shockingly nonviolent. How can an ancient human, who has no idea what's going on, be acting like the benevolent souls today? Maybe the historical ones weren't as barbaric as I thought.

"It's okay. We're going to take you home, now. You're doing great," I soothed.

Hunter drew a mucous-addled breath. "You're…an alien. Why can I understand you?"

"The bastards who captured you injected a translator, I think. Listen, what I'm about to tell you is upsetting, but it's the truth. I don't know how I can help, given the circumstances—all I can promise, I'll do whatever I can. Do you really want to know what happened?"

The unfrozen human nodded. "P-please."

"Aliens called the Farsul captured you, and have been keeping you frozen for future experiments. They've been waking up small batches of captives for centuries, so, um, Earth isn't the Earth you remember. The solar year is 2137. Humans are an interstellar species, at war with the Farsul-Kolshian conspiracy, because they meddled with your world and everyone else's. We located this base, and we're here to rescue you and expose the culprits. Does that make sense so far?"

"Yes…and n-no. Why would anyone want to experiment on us—on me? Has it really been…my family is dead, if it's been centuries. Oh

God, this isn't happening…"

"I know this is a lot, Hunter." *I really wish he had a different name. Do not say 'predator', Sovlin, you don't want Hunter thinking about hunting.* "Much of the galaxy perceives humans as evil and violent. These guys tried to genetically 'cure' you, like they did to my race centuries ago. After that failed, they joined the crowd that wants you extinct."

"They think we're evil because of the wars."

"And because you're a predator race," Onso yipped, unsolicited.

Oh, damn you, uplift. Now you've done it.

Hunter's head snapped over to the Yotul. The marsupial had gotten his own human out of her pod, and from the bits I overheard, he'd been hypothesizing over its engineering to her. My primitive Terran groaned, spotting the reddish-furred alien; his amber gaze darted around the room. I could sense that the primate wanted little more than to curl up under a rock and disappear, which meant he wasn't intending to harm me. However, I was worried predator talk would push him toward his name's origin.

"Predator race?" the brown-haired beast echoed.

I heaved a weary sigh. "You…hunt, *Hunter*. Your eyes face forward. The galaxy's only other predator race eats and enslaves people."

"That's…fucking disgusting." *I'm glad, yet a little surprised, he feels that averse to the Arxur.* "Do they eat humans?"

"No."

"Do they eat…your kind?"

"Gojids? Yeah, um, back when I was a starship captain, they…no, wait, you didn't ask about my personal life. I apologize for my indiscretion."

"Go on, if you want to. I can hear the pain in your voice."

"Well, I was on a video call…which is a remote communication where you can see each other…with my family from my starship. They were eaten alive as I watched, and I couldn't lift a claw to help. You can say I've had to work through some fears and hatred to get used to humans."

Hunter's face contorted with what I'd come to recognize as the

Terran expression of sympathy. My spines began to settle down, and I decided that he didn't constitute a threat. It was surprising how little his behavior aligned with the savage cruelty, or at best, indifference, I expected from pre-FTL humanity. So much for what my therapist said about them being a territorial, aggressive species. Their dark past was almost worsened by how similar these primitives seemed to modern Earthlings.

I thought humans had changed, and that they attained a higher degree of empathy as civilization advanced. Yet this poorly-named predator still pities me, even as his reality is in shambles.

"I'm so sorry," he growled. "That must still weigh on you. I can't even process my family being…gone, in what was an instant for me. I think it's going to hit me like a freight train later."

I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry for what happened to you too. We have to make the best of our circumstances now, and maybe, along the way, get a bit of revenge."

"Revenge. Man, I'm just a college student…does my university still exist anymore? They all must've assumed I was dead; I bet it killed Ma."

"Er, depends on the city, I imagine. Long story there that involves the war. Anyhow, if you wanted, the United Nations might be able to locate some relatives. You could still have people, and maybe there's records of what happened with any loved ones you remember."

"Why bother? The descendants are gonna be my great-great-great something or another. My family, the one I know and care about, is long dead."

"It's closure. Sure, it's mainly a chance to know your future kin, and protect your family lineage. But it's also a chance to preserve your loved ones' memory. That's part of why I persist—delaying a world where nobody remembers my little girl. And I tell myself there's a non-zero chance I'll feel happiness again, some day. You're much younger than me. It won't be easy, but you can make a life for yourself."

"As if. I'll be a shoe on the wrong foot. Won't know anything about the culture, and my qualifications probably don't mean shit anymore. What can I possibly do with myself?! What is there for me

on Earth?"

"I don't know how curious humans were back in your times, but you could start by learning about all the alien lifeforms and customs. It's a chance to discover something new, that nobody else from your era ever saw. To pass on your slice of history to the galaxy."

"But how do I *do* that? I don't think I can handle this shit. I'm no use to anyone."

"That's not true. The United Nations is short on manpower, so all extra hands ease the burden—no matter what capacity you're in. Start with small steps, Hunter. You don't have to have all the answers today."

"Small steps. Yeah, okay. Do you have something in mind? I need to keep my brain occupied."

"Well, why don't you come with us? We're going to sweep the archives. You can help me out just by tagging along. I…would like to know how these Farsul fuckers changed the history of Gojidkind, but it also scares me a little."

"Why?"

"I'm worried it'll be as disturbed as your history. Or what was the present, for you."

"…fair, honestly. Okay then. I'll follow you, Sovlin."

Most of the awakened humans were being taken back to the submarine, to be tended to in relative safety. I could hear chatter over the radio, as other groups of UN soldiers landed to aid a full sweep of the Archives. The Terran military was also launching a communications buoy, to ensure that UN command above Talsk received news of this debacle. If Hunter requested to accompany us, I didn't see why Tyler would object to it. This living relic of the past could be the best chance I had to understand the nature of predators.

Maybe human nature is to toe the line between great beneficence and unfathomable depravity. The choice is theirs—yet unwritten in history, with far-reaching implications for all life.

Onso perked his ears up. "I'm going with the group back to the ship, old man. Then, if I can choose my assignment, we're finding the

Yotul room. It'll be wonderful to cleanse the Federation's influence from our culture, for good."

"Okay. I hope you find what you need on that, but I won't be joining you. Assuming Tyler gives us the go-ahead, Hunter and I are looking into the Gojids' past," I muttered.

"We're coming with you." Samantha had materialized behind me, a steely look in her forest-green eyes. The biowarfare mask made her appear like a machine. "Carlos and I have gone through hell with you. We're not going to let you decide you're a monster. Your therapist has enough of a headache with you already."

Hunter pointed to her mask. "That's a…do I need one of those?"

"Yeah, we'll fetch you one. You should be good for now. It doesn't sound like they inject the cure until they launch a 'new batch,'" Carlos chimed in.

Before proceeding deeper into the Archives, and prying beyond the scope of actions conducted against Earth, I needed authorization for my plan from my superior. Tyler could be asked to provide Hunter with proper gear; knowing the blond officer, he would permit the ancient Terran to tag along with me. Seeing all of humanity, past and present, as more than predators was exactly what he had asked.

With the identity of every Federation species in the balance, it was our moral duty to unearth all of the Farsul's crimes against sapience.

Chapter 128

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 16, 2137

With multiple crews having touched down at the Galactic Archives, we split up into teams. Tyler presented us with one hour to accrue the most essential data, and reconvene at the submarine to transport the intel elsewhere. In case anything went wrong, getting any information about “key species” off-world was critical. Venlil, Zurulians, Arxur, Yotul, and Krakotl were considered the top five; thankfully, my commander also honored my personal request to investigate the Gojids.

Officer Cardona decided to accompany Onso to the Yotul room, while also keeping watch over Farsul prisoners such as Veiq. Carlos wound up leading our small posse, roping a timid archivist into showing us the way. Hunter had acquired suitable attire from the submarine, and loped after us. If someone told me a day ago that I’d turn my back on a primitive predator, with a name that fit how I imagined their nomenclature, I would’ve laughed. However, my concerns about the ancient Terran had all but evaporated.

I have bigger issues on my plate, with what I’m about to seek out. This could destroy the little that’s left of my heritage.

To say I was terrified of the Gojids’ true history was an understatement. Depending on the degree of atrocities I uncovered, what was best for my species might be to bury it once and for all. Certain unsavory elements shouldn’t come back, no matter how egregious the Federation’s removal methods were. How would the rest of the galaxy perceive us, and our refugees, if we were at all similar to the Terrans’ past?

Shadows moved behind me, and I felt slight pressure on my spine. A yelp came from Hunter, who nursed his now-bleeding pointer finger; the primitive human had decided, without warning, to poke the end of a bristle. He brought it upon himself, touching a sharp object for no reason. Maybe Onso wasn’t so bad, compared to other creatures below a certain technological level.

“What compelled you to do that?” I spat.

Hunter shrugged. “Curiosity killed the cat. Only one way to find out how sharp it really is, you know? Say, why do you just have spikes on part of your back? It’s like there are blotches without it.”

“Well, let’s say they got lined up by a machine gun, and were ripped out of my spine by a stream of bullets. It hurt, it really hurt. They can’t regrow either because I’m fucking old, so Sam calls me Baldy to rub it in my face. Does that answer your question?”

“Ouch. Yeah, man.”

Carlos risked a curious glance back. “What year was it for you? You sound like you’re from the States.”

“1966. American, born and raised.”

“I used to wonder why aliens would target you crazy Yanks, in all the UFO tales,” Sam quipped. “Maybe they were drawn to you because of your media presence. Figured you represented us all; you act like you do.”

“Australian accent?”

“That it is. Now’s your chance for the kangaroo jokes. Never heard those before.”

“Actually, I wanted to ask about the glass rectangles you all have on your belts. Are those 22nd century TVs?”

I barely kept my disdain to myself, instead focusing on Carlos. The male guard was holding a Farsul prisoner at gunpoint; we’d entered a new hallway in search of the Gojid room. Again, I remarked internally how Onso was versed enough in technology to regurgitate a textbook, at least. He never questioned what basic things were, or showed such an obvious lack of knowledge. Hunter clearly knew very little about *any* technology.

“No, people still like their television sets large and mounted.” Samantha unclipped her holopad, unlocking it with facial ID. “This is a holopad…it actually can facilitate watching TV shows, though. Mostly, it’s used to access the internet and talk instantaneously with friends. You had phones in your time, right?”

Hunter huffed in indignation. “Phones existed since the 1800s! You’re telling me, that little thing…can call people?”

“With video streams, or send them written messages. The screens being 3D are a nice touch.”

“Okay. Streams like a river…is the video water-powered? And, uh, what’s the internet?”

Does he even know what a computer is? That’s going to be difficult to explain.

I attempted to withhold a derisive tone. “Streams are a live video feed. Does the word ‘computer’ mean anything to you? We should start there.”

“Yes, but that *can’t* be a proper computer. They take up entire rooms. Your ‘holopad’ could fit in a pocket. There’s no way that could have the necessary power, and you’re not even chilling the mechanisms!” Hunter exclaimed.

“We can pack enormous processing power into tiny chips, and perform functions more complex than you can imagine,” Carlos explained. “The internet is a way that computers communicate, all the way across the globe…and now, the galaxy. It’s basically a web for housing forums and information, and by now, it encompasses the collective knowledge of mankind.”

Samantha hummed in appreciation. “It is remarkable, really. You can ask a question, and a program scours that entire archive. Millions of results on any topic you can dream of—science, history, celebrities, entertainment—at your fingertips in seconds.”

“Wow! I can’t even understand how humans could build something like that. Research must be so easy for you. We had to scour books to find a single source, and you have millions of encyclopedias thrown into your lap. You have no idea how good you have it, do you?”

“Humans have come a long way from being primitive,” I acknowledged.

Carlos curled his fist, and started to round on me; that was before noticing that the Farsul had finished guiding us to the Gojid chamber. My spines bristled, sensing a grave threat in the information housed here. Grappling with the undisguised truth of our omnivory, and possibly seeing my own kind feast on flesh; I wasn’t ready for concrete evidence. The knowledge of my ancestry had almost sapped my will to live the first time, even with my unpaid debt to Earth. I felt disgusting, just dwelling on the loathsome facts.

My human companions weren't as hesitant as me, skulking into the room. They barked orders, using their guns as motivators; Gojids were mixed in with the native staff, and part of me wondered if these were from the cradle's primitive era. However, the fact that some called out "United Nations" suggested they were active conspirators, not captives. I tailed my comrades, sweeping my gun around the room for any threats. Hunter tiptoed after me, apprehensive about our locale. Samantha took the privilege of coercing the staff to lie on the ground.

Flexing a tattooed arm in menacing fashion, Carlos ordered the Farsul archivist who guided us here to unlock the mainframe. The conspiracy employee trudged forward, and leaned over a sensor for a retinal scan. Too soon for my liking, we had access to the grand collection; everything documented at Gojidkind was at my claws. Hunter fell in by my side, and arched a quizzical eyebrow. He didn't understand why I was keeping away from the console, like it burned to the touch.

"Tyler said we have one hour to gather intel, but take your time," Sam hissed.

I drew a deep breath, and hovered my claw over a series of folders. Carlos procured a drive, starting to download any files he could find. Should I have prevented the human from transcribing this info, at least until I reviewed the contents myself? Nerves hindered my breathing, as conscious thoughts diminished. My mind was in a trance, but I managed to pull up a piece labeled 'Overview', on screen.

"Welcome, archivists of the future, and congratulations on your promotions!" A Farsul voiceover thundered over the video feed, and I flinched at the volume. "This video will be a brief synopsis of species 92-A, who go by the name 'Gojid.' Millions of hours of pre-contact footage are available, to be sorted over the years by your diligent paws. I've compiled examples of the key aspects of their culture, and a conclusive analysis of their successful conversion."

Hunter tilted his head, watching footage of prehistoric Gojids rigging a sailboat. The video scrolled through a series of clay houses, and sprawling orchards that didn't look much different from the modern day. An overhead image of a village, with limited electric lights, completed the narrative. It slowly faded to black,

void of narration, and switched to primitive cave artwork of workers tilling fields.

“The Gojids call their homeworld the cradle, a name that stems from a local deity: the Great Protector. As their creation myth goes, all of nature was crafted to be the perfect home for their species,” the Farsul declared on the recording. “The land provides, and *She* heeds their cries against threats by famine or beast. This has been their predominant religion since the advent of agriculture. Farming doctrine and the faith were spread alongside each other, with the locals claiming the Protector taught them how plants grew.”

Surveillance video showed Gojids sorting through a forest, and gathering up anything they could find. The camera lens zeroed in on half-eaten carcasses, which were thrown onto a cart by the primitives. These filthy members of my kind stopped short of a clearing, ducking into bushes. Splotchy, lean predators with massive fangs were stalking a grazing species, and downing as many of the prey as they could.

The Gojids are hiding because they saw the predators. That’s prey behavior, right?

A gunshot rang out, and the Gojids burst from the foliage with reckless abandon. One splotchy predator snarled in pain, as a bullet bore into its haunches. The primitive sapients were stretching their arms out to appear larger, and waving their claws around. To my bewilderment, the hunting animals dashed off without their prey; my people drove predators away from a catch, with aggression. The Gojids congratulated themselves, before collecting the kills.

The recording proceeded with an explanation. “Gojids are a scavenger species. They allow predators to do the dirty work, then swoop in to obtain the carcasses. Flesh is not a staple of their diet, but rather a pricey treat for occasional consumption. What you just witnessed is a family of market vendors, scrounging for cuts to sell to the upper class.

With this being an accepted cultural item, one of status even, it’s apparent to us that a cure is needed. The government, locally-elected settlement councils, even send out foraging parties during times of hardship; it’s endorsed as a method of survival by their very leaders.”

The footage transitioned to grainy images of starships landing, and

stories plastered in prehistoric newspapers. *CREATURES FROM ANOTHER WORLD — THEY COME BEARING GIFTS*, the headline read. The front page image showed a priest of the Great Protector in conversation with a Kolshian. I managed to read a bit about a new future for Gojidkind, before the feed cut to pro-exterminator pamphlets.

My emotions were in turmoil, after seeing my kind scooping up predator food on film. Could I argue that the Farsul's gift of the cure wasn't a blessing? Was it that wrong to initiate a proper beliefs system?

"Their temperament toward aliens proved non-hostile. Formal reeducation seemed too extreme. With how invested Gojids were in 'nature', convincing them to adopt exterminators…they weren't amenable to the concept. They laughed off our teachings, and spurned our ways. Conversion would go on to require decades of gradual effort.

Had the Gojids been introduced to the wider galaxy in a hurry, it would've been disastrous. But with the technology we gave them, how could they not come to love us? That was how we got our paws in the door, and it also let us slip our ideas into the public domain. We mixed the cure with life-saving medicines, and spread the rumor that it was a judgment from the Protector."

Clips of Farsul transporting our priests to remote wilderness, and beginning excavations, played on the main screen. The time-lapse showed days of work, condensed into a span of minutes. Hunter and Samantha both were enamored with the landscape, between the jagged fronds on the trees and the sunset-orange sands. I was more focused on the tablets the archaeologists were digging up, and passing to Gojid observers for examination. Those were the Protector's Stones; they were preserved in our planetary museum, and cited as its oldest texts.

"Of course, the Priesthood insisted that all of nature was created by their deity for a higher purpose. But after discovering the texts we planted, they did our work for us. Predators were cursed by bloodlust, tarnishing the Protector's creation; they existed to threaten and kill. Her words! Gojids, the chosen, would be punished if they continued down the predator path…why else would they suddenly be dying from meat consumption? Within decades, we'd

wiped all recollection of their scavenger past."

I had already grown accustomed to the idea that our religion was falsified by the Federation. Fortunately, I'd never been an adherent of the faith, so it didn't affect me. What was alarming was how easy it'd been for them to convince our entire planet those tablets were legitimate findings. History could be rewritten at their whims, and nobody would remember that it had once been different. Was this distortion of our primary faith necessary?

All things considered, the summative montage hadn't been as horrific as I imagined, with a single incident captured of carcass collection; perhaps I could pass it off as a single tribe, and clear our name. The final pieces of the video were of Gojids at Federation summits, and patrolling on starships. I reminded myself that these clips were from before the Arxur's discovery, to our knowledge. The military fixtures on the bridge seemed odd, and left me wondering if our aggression was that severe as to build war vessels.

Why would we need a military? For the exterminators to clear colonies, or for violent purposes?

"The Gojids had become model Federation members; they completed a slow, but smooth transition. Their malleability allowed us to fine-tune their temperament. We worked to elicit fleeing responses to predatory stimuli, of course. But their natural ability to tackle threats and protect their fields from harm made them the ideal military species, in a defensive capacity."

I paused the video. "What?! They *chose* for us to become a powerful species, despite being omnivores? I knew they used the Krakotl, but we're not that aggressive!"

"They co-opted your religion, poisoned you through doctors, and that's what you focus on?" Hunter grumbled. "I don't understand any of what I woke up to, but my head *hurts*."

Samantha wagged a finger. "What's with the chitchat? Finish the video, so we can pack it up. There's only a few seconds left in this prick's monologue, thank heavens."

I played the Farsul's endnote, at the human's request. "Due to the Gojids' location, it's in the Federation's interest to encourage their military growth. They could act as a safeguard, to keep Species 45-G in line, should those nightmares ever find their roots. Having a

compliant asset mitigates risk of such aggression spilling over our borders unchecked. Thus, I'm grateful they're stuck being 45-G's neighbors. I expect Gojids to necessitate little correction, and to fulfill a stabilizing role…perhaps even pacifying the region."

Carlos and Samantha looked mystified by the mention of "Species 45-G." I was befuddled too, until I pondered the short list of Gojid neighbors. The Venlil were the weakest race in the galaxy, so it was obviously not them; the Zurulians specialized in healing, which wasn't an aggressive practice. The Dossur couldn't attack a cotton ball with their size. That led to the apparent answer: the Farsul must have discovered humanity before Hunter's time—before they'd even discovered the Gojids.

Why wasn't that documented in the Terran chamber? Why hadn't cure research begun sooner?

"That's certainly interesting." Samantha, having not stumbled upon the only possible answer, waved her gun in the Farsul prisoners' faces. "Who is Species 45-G? Are they dead?"

"Sorry, but I can't tell you," a staffer croaked.

I chewed at my claws. "Is it humans?"

"No. That video is from before the Arxur were discovered, let alone the Terrans. Use *some* modicum of logic."

"Give us a straight answer, right now! We don't have time for your games! Who is it?" Samantha roared. "We'll find out eventually, with or without you in one piece."

Carlos raised a placating hand. "It can't be worse than what you've done to humans. A little late to start hiding things, don't you think? Just give us a name to put with this 45-G designation."

Without our history haunting me, I could focus on helping the United Nations pick apart other findings. I checked the progress of the humans' data download, which showed as almost complete. Perhaps the last note could be used to make the Gojids respectable again. This mystery species must be one the Federation wiped out, which suggested Earth wasn't the first planet they were willing to genocide. It seemed likely nobody had heard of 45-G, so we'd have to locate their extinct homeworld.

Pushing the focus onto the truly dangerous species might be good. It offers an unknown threat, and the Farsul complimented our civility by

comparison.

The female predator bared her teeth. “Why aren’t you talking? Name. Spit it out!

“Why don’t you ask about something else?” The Farsul staffer gulped, as Samantha fired a bullet right next to his ear. “THE VENLIL! It’s the Venlil.”

Shock made my blood run cold, and the humans displayed equal surprise. Hunter showed no signs of disbelief, but he wasn’t familiar with the Venlil’s reputation. The Farsul must be fibbing with his answer, though it was bold to provide an obvious false response at gunpoint. Perhaps it was worth it to investigate what other Terran soldiers found in their greatest ally’s archive chamber.

Chapter 129

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: January 17, 2137

The United Nations had multiple operations ongoing, and more threads to keep up with politically. The Duerten Shield and their various subsidiaries required delicate handling; to the avians' credit, they were helpful with the rescued cattle from Shaza's sector. Earth also had 31 direct allies to manage diplomatic relations with. The factor causing me the biggest headache, though—a human colony within the Mazics' borders had welcomed its first settlers, and three extrasolar colonies within Terran space had opened their doors soon after.

I was pleased the predators were establishing themselves, and expanding in a peaceful manner. However, that rendered the millions of humans residing on Venlil Prime more controversial than ever. After living here for months, several petitioned our office for citizenship; we weighed the requests with the same criteria for any Federation immigrants. Anti-human dissidents argued that more primates should go to Colia or Leirn, the respective Zurulian and Yotul homeworlds. These refugees also had other options available now, they said, between rising new colonies and Earth's welfare having stabilized.

To be honest, I didn't think it was a bad idea for the Terrans to mix with different alien populaces, like any other species. However, these Venlil critics weren't making proposals out of concern for humanity's continuance. They were alarmed by recent overhauls of Federation institutions. My dreamy plans with Noah fell through because of the political upheaval; the only visit I took to Earth was for the opening of our permanent embassy in Vienna. As much as I'd love to step out of the public spotlight, the alliance I cherished depended on me maintaining power.

This is going to be a vicious re-election cycle. I expect my opponent, Veln, to appeal to voters who don't want binocular eyes on every street corner. For these final three months, the campaign is my focus.

"What is my legacy, Kam? I've served in this office for three years,

and we discovered the best friends I could ask for. But it's still early enough for someone to rip it all to shreds. I rue the possibility of a day where we don't lock arms with humanity," I mumbled aloud.

The military advisor pinned his ears back. "I wouldn't worry. It's a little late to disentangle ourselves, and besides, people are starting to get used to humans! The Federation consistently polls as less popular than Earth. Besides, sunk cost: we've invested lives into Earth's side of the war. *And* they freed the cattle."

"Rescues," Glim corrected from the couch.

The Venlil rescue was wearing a human scarf over his neck, covering up the brand. After his role in landing the Duerten alliance, it seemed wasteful not to offer him a cabinet position. It was a politically-savvy move too, with Glim being a sympathetic liaison to pro-exterminator sects. As my "campaign advisor", he could travel with me to various cities and remind the populace about the newly-liberated souls.

Kam flicked his ears. "Right, rescues. Regardless, if Zhao flew all the way from Earth to accompany Noah, and Sara, an apolitical human, is also on the guest list…they must be here to offer their support on the campaign trail. I hope you've decided whether to accept, ma'am."

"Cheln voiced worry over the optics, campaigning alongside humans. It'd make it seem like people are voting for predators with a vote for me. Political suicide…did I miss anything?" I sighed.

Glim tilted his head. "Some people won't attend events with humans present, especially in rural areas. It's asking for exterminators to stir up trouble."

"Thank you for your concerns…you're not wrong. We can't tie our platform to them, but I would feel terrible rejecting their help. They understand politics, so we should outright discuss PR concerns with them."

"On that note, I'm…slightly concerned that the new predator citizens are able to vote. Should they really have a say in how we run our planet? It's a way for them to influence our affairs."

"By that logic, why should a Zurulian or Krakotl citizen have the right to vote? We're not discriminating by species, Glim."

"I care about Noah, and the Gaians…but they're an extraordinary

circumstance, which no one fully understands. We haven't engaged with them in peacetime, or established special laws accounting for their…unique attributes. There's no precedent. Nothing to stop them, if we're wrong about—"

A knock echoed against the door, and Glim pressed a paw to his forehead. I called for the visitors to enter, watching as a crisply-dressed Secretary-General Zhao strolled in. His black hair was combed over, and his brown eyes held distinct worry. I'd warmed to Earth's new leader, but I missed the fatherly aura that Meier evoked. Elias had barely been older than me, yet he projected an air of dignity and wisdom.

Sara acted reserved, finding a seat after a meek greeting. Ambassador Noah's eyes didn't light up like usual, which tipped me off that something was amiss. Perhaps this wasn't a cordial visit; I wondered if something had gone awry in the war effort. This could relate to the cured humans at Mileau. My office received word of the bioweapon's use, but I might've underestimated its significance to the Terrans. Racking my brain for other possible culprits, no answers presented themselves.

"Hey, Tarva." Noah squeezed himself between Glim and I, pulling me into his embrace for a second. "How are you feeling?"

I brought my prosthetic tail to his chin, turning his face toward me. Emotions swirled in the ambassador's pupils, indignant anger that chilled my blood. There was also a trace of loss and pity lurking, which I didn't understand. It would be easy to assume that there was a threat against the Venlil, except the human envoy lacked military generals. Besides, the uncertainty in Noah's grimace wasn't how Terrans responded to threats, at least in the past.

"What happened? You're looking at me like I have a month left to live," I hissed.

The ambassador shared a glance with Sara. "That's why we both came, to break the news. We thought you deserved to have…your oldest friends here."

"Nobody is in danger." Sara arched her thick eyebrows for emphasis, anticipating the fearful guesses that would pop into my head. "This is about our mission to the Galactic Archives on Talsk."

"I know about that," I offered. "You mentioned attempting to

recover anything the Farsul hid about prehistoric cultures. Are… Venlil omnivores? Is that what this is?"

"No! Far as we can tell, no. But we uncovered some shocking information about the Venlil, which flings every thesis I wrote about your sociology out the window."

Secretary-General Zhao set his eyes on my snout. "Dr. Rosario is correct; this changes everything that's known about your species. Doesn't the way they constantly hammer home that you're the weakest species raise suspicion? Let me tell you, that's propaganda they force fed you."

"You're saying we weren't always weak," I breathed. "Is this a suggestion that the Venlil should become a military species…and train to behave predatorily? Is this a critique of our emotional culture?"

"Not at all. Governor, how you act upon the information I'm about to provide isn't my concern. Humanity will stand beside you, no matter what you decide. It deeply saddens us to discover how our friends were oppressed and mistreated. My belief is that the choice, of who you wish to be, should be yours. Not ours, certainly not the Kolshians'."

Losing yet another chunk of our identity was gut-wrenching; it often felt like the humans were dealing sucker punches in quick succession. Perceived facts, which were infallible from our perspective, crumbled as if they were made of sand. Few institutions were left untouched by the predators' arrival, mere months after first contact. It wasn't their fault that the Federation's meddling was so pervasive, or that the Venlil were blind to such manipulations. Still, it would be more comfortable to stuff my paws over my ears and ignore the latest truths.

That's why there's such fearsome opposition to the humans. It's hard to market the destruction of every belief we've ever held.

My platform was about change, and the need to rid ourselves of the Federation's lies—no matter how difficult it was. That meant the full picture of the Venlil's past must be dispersed. If the Kolshians committed crimes against my kind, we deserved justice. I managed to give Zhao an ear flick, and he powered up my office's projector. However, General Kam looked skeptical about Venlil not being the meek creatures we were reputed to be.

“I’ve seen for myself that we’re a sensitive species,” my military advisor muttered. “Our forces aren’t…tough. In the heat of battle, we cry or we flee. That’s why we needed the Federation to defend us. That’s why humans defend us now!”

Noah pursed his lips. “You look angry, Glim. How do you feel about this?”

Glim turned his scowl on the predator. “I, for one, believe they could’ve done anything to us. The Kolshians are evil. Mileau proved they have zero qualms over harming innocent herbivores.”

“That’s the truth,” Sara growled. “It wasn’t just the Venlil we learned about. There’s records of how *they* changed every species they came across.”

Secretary-General Zhao queued a video. “Including us. However, this meeting is only about helping our friends. I’ve had my staff share the entire cache, millions of hours of footage, with you, Tarva. Every log a researcher recorded, every aspect of society they pored over, and every action they took against you, it’s there. Again, what you do with it is your prerogative.”

“We’re here for you.” Noah placed his palm over my paw, and traced his fingers over the fur in reassuring patterns. “If you want humanity’s aid, we’d be happy to lend our resources to recovering your past. We could make detailed lessons of the unadulterated history.”

“Okay, just tell me already! The suspense is going to kill me,” I grumbled.

The Chinese national obliged, playing the video in mournful silence. My eyes soaked in the long-ago recordings of our homeworld. There were a few images of Venlil fights, which the United Nations censored due to their bloody nature. Overhead footage was also captured of my kind fending off larger animals, headbutting them with frenzied aggression. Oddly enough, clips existed of predators spotting Venlil, isolated in the wilderness, and turning to avoid us.

Zhao scratched the back of his head. “From what we’ve gathered, the Venlil are genuinely a species that feels emotions more strongly than others. This also entails high impulsivity; you’re prone to lash out when feeling angry or threatened.”

“That’s just one hypothesis, of course,” Sara jumped in. “What’s

certain is that the Venlil were seen engaging in contests of dominance. ‘Duels’ and ‘feuds’ would break out from perceived insults; your culture was honor-based.”

Glim scrunched his ears. “Why would anyone see fighting as scrupulous? There’s no honor in that.”

“The United Nations does not condone unnecessary violence, so I can’t offer a justification,” Noah said. “In our past, duels were seen as a method of vindication. It was about proving a point, and not accepting slights against you.”

The Secretary-General nodded. “Aliens could’ve done it for any reason, and we’ll never be able to ask your rationale. Regardless, this same honor-driven ethos is what irked the Federation about the Venlil. Care to explain, Ambassador Williams?”

“Of course. The Federation outstayed their welcome, after first contact. Frankly, you knew the changes they made conflicted with all logic. Ancient Venlil were remarkably stubborn in their convictions; they didn’t take well to being ‘mellowed.’”

“The Venlil were an urgent case to subdue, because of your aggression. A Farsul researcher referred to you as, ‘More temperamental than the Krakotl,’” Sara finished. “The people of Sk…this planet thwarted the Federation’s attempts at reeducation. That led to…drastic measures.”

The human scientist twirled her curls around a finger, and I scanned her closely. She had started to say a name before switching to “this planet”; while I wouldn’t prod at this moment, I wasn’t going to let that slide off my radar. For now, it was head-spinning enough to hear about traits that were antithetical to a modern Venlil’s disposition. If the Federation succeeded in breaking our spirit, why would they need to rub our snouts in the newfound weakness?

The Kolshians and the Farsul fashioned us into the galaxy’s laughingstock. Why did the Krakotl get to be a military species, and how could we have been more aggressive than a coercive race like them?

Zhao resumed his video; Venlil were packed into camps and forced to watch propaganda clips. Federation teachers implemented similar curriculums in the classrooms, targeting the youth with zeal. Subsequent clips were spliced together, of our citizens lashing out

against the Federation's occupation. Exterminators lost their flamethrowers in wrestling matches, and tussles led to suit punctures that removed incendiary immunity. Burning occupiers ran off with screams, chased by crazed-looking Venlil spewing fuel.

That was the first in a chain of chaotic events, which must've infuriated the Federation. One Venlil was shown launching himself several feet, and latching his paws around a Farsul's head. I noticed that his legs were straighter and sturdier than any of ours I'd seen. His face seemed deformed too, even with the motion blur. There was little time to focus on those facts, however, as images of alien visitors dragged from cars ensued. Property destruction appeared to be rampant, wherever the Federation built anything; someone with a stolen flamethrower lit the entire reeducation camp ablaze.

Noah drew a shaky breath. "The Farsul assumed that the Venlil would give in, after a few years…that the re-education would take hold. But no matter how long they stuck your people in those camps, the second they had a chance to rebel, they did."

"The Kolshians proposed drastic measures, even floating around glassing your world," the Secretary-General explained. "They were humiliated by the failure of the uplifting process, but instead of annihilation, they eventually elected to impose the ultimate insult on you."

"They discovered a genetic joint disorder that caused your knees to bend inward, Tarva. It negates your ramming power. They also created a defect that prevented your olfactory system from developing…to limit your threat detection abilities and increase your fearfulness. The Feds forcibly dragged every Venlil citizen off for editing, and screened the populace to ensure it hadn't missed a single person."

"That's…they physically modified us? They crippled us?!" I hissed.

"It's their fault the Arxur targeted me!" Glim was hysterical, slamming a paw against a couch cushion. His tail was flailing with emotion. "If they hasn't made us so weak, the fucking grays wouldn't see us as *perfect* livestock! Maybe I could've outrun…the cattle collectors…when they…"

Sara's eyes were moist with pity. "I wish I could say that was it. Feds ensured that the re-education efforts succeeded, by taking every child born following the gene-edits to be raised by a Farsul

off-world. *That* was when they sold you on how weak you were, oh, the weakest species in the galaxy. From the day the kids were able to speak, they heard that line."

"Farsul also raised the Venlil pups with the rest of the Federation's ideology, and provided positive reinforcement for any fear response. Then, they had that generation raise their own kids, and waited for the natives to die off. The rest is history," the Secretary-General rumbled. "The pacified Venlil were moved home, and told they were isolated as pups due to a plague."

"The Federation *saved* you." Noah's voice dripped with bitter sarcasm, and his grip around my wrist had become vice-like. "Go home to *Venlil Prime*, a name conjured up by those colonizer bastards. The authentic name was too violent for a prey species."

"Authentic name?" Kam echoed, in a dazed voice.

"Skalga. The best translation we could find was 'World of Death.' Perhaps that was early Venlil's experience, or maybe it's gallows' humor about your planet's extreme conditions."

Even as the humans plainly spelled it out, my mind rejected the novel understanding. Something as sacred as our homeworld's title —the place that I was governor of and sworn to protect—even that was a fabrication to control us? What heartless monster would remove a child from their parents, and treat them as a pawn? My visceral outrage was reminiscent of the charged emotions, when the tortured Marcel was first wheeled in front of us. I could see my anger mirrored in the predators' clenched fists, and the way they leaned forward in their seats.

"They took our children," I growled. "They took kids away from their mothers! I know the pain of losing a daughter."

Noah massaged my shoulders, while scowling at the carpet. "You're so strong, Tarva. Nobody deserves to suffer what you did with your daughter, and the Federation didn't hesitate to inflict that agony on millions."

"The Federation are lying frauds. They mocked us, and spit in our faces…they do it to this day. Why?"

Zhao issued a bitter chuckle. "If I knew that answer, the same thing wouldn't have happened to humanity. You're preaching to the choir on that front. We're not that different; maybe that's why we get

along so well."

"The people of V…Skalga are owed the truth. Kam, we're releasing everything at my next campaign event. To think the Kolshians treated us, and countless others, with utter disregard. They deformed us at a genetic level! Who would commit such a violation?"

"We'll help as much or as little as you like. We might be able to reverse their edits," Sara offered. "I understand how personal this is, so if you'd like us to stay out of it, humanity will respect that."

"Are you kidding? We never would've learned the truth without you; your soldiers risked their lives to get this information. You are sincere, wonderful friends, and I wouldn't want to face something like this without you. Any suggestions you have, we welcome your input."

The Secretary-General dipped his head. "Whatever you need *and* anything I think might help, it's at your disposal. We support the Venlil, through highs and lows. Of all of our allies, we personally brought what we discovered to you, before any others. Humanity's alliances are little more than handshake agreements, but with you, I have confidence our mutual loyalty is unshakeable."

"Well, I think it's past time our friendship was official. We should unite, with a shared venture that's what the Federation pretended to be. Blast everything you found in the Archives to anyone who'll speak to you, and then, start your—*our* alliance. The galaxy deserves something better."

In my periphery, I observed how the briefing's attendees reacted to my proposal. Noah had turned his focus to searching the Secretary-General's expression; my sweet ambassador loved the idea of strengthening Earth's diplomatic ties. Hope flashed in Sara's eyes, a sign that neither astronaut had abandoned their peaceful intentions. If I was reading Zhao's neutral stare correctly, he'd already thought of extending a United Nations-like organization to allied species on his own.

That left the question of whether my advisors saw this as a kneejerk proposition. The Archives' revelations would lend our goals validity. Still, convincing prominent diplomats to commit their governments to a group spearheaded by humans would be difficult. General Kam had snapped out of his trance, signaling agreement

with tail language. However, Glim's expression had hardened with skepticism, and for a moment, I feared whether the rescue opposed formalizing an alliance with predators.

Zhao raised his eyebrows. "I would be honored to secure our alliance in an official capacity. My people will reach out to all of our allies, convey the Archives' findings, and extend an invitation to a convention. We'll host it in a neutral location, and welcome anyone who seeks to join our formalized alliance, whatever its name may be."

"That's a great idea, in theory. But who would be invited to the summit?" Glim avoided the predators' gazes, as their heads snapped toward him. "The Duerten Shield is only using you. And how can you guarantee the Kolshians won't use it as an opportunity to attack you?"

"The Duerten Shield and their allies will be extended the courtesy of an invite, but I'm sure it's a formality. Even if they send a representative, which would surprise me, they have no interest in joining us. As for security, we can direct the guests to a hand-off site, and keep the true location unknown beforehand. They'll be escorted straight from the relay point to the summit."

"I love the idea of us addressing and wooing potential friends, for more than the five minutes I got on Aafa. But does that plan work for you, Tarva?" Noah growled softly.

I flicked my ears in agreement, though a knot of anger still churned in my stomach. The anguish inflicted upon the Venlil was inexcusable, but at least it functioned to bring us closer to our friends, the humans. Assuming Earth triumphed in the war, we could lay the groundwork for genuine harmony. The predators could deliver what the Kolshians pretended to seek in their mission statement.

Chapter 130

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: January 31, 2137

Weeks had passed from our fateful venture to the Archives; a central member of the conspiracy had fallen with little more than a whisper, weakened by the Arxur raid that rattled them post-Earth. I was now contemplating the predators' chosen punishment for the Farsul. My time on the bridge during its enactment, and the surrounding events, were a blur. It was fair to say that I was distracted by the pre-FTL humans traveling on our vessel, along with the shocking revelations about the Venlil.

I couldn't picture the mewling Venlil as the volatile creatures caught on film, butting heads and brimming with ferocity. The Terrans had met the perfect race to be warrior buddies, yet nobody realized it until now. Thinking back, the difference in Slanek's behavior was night and day, from his time on the ship to our encounter on Sillis; Marcel's silver-gray friend had grown a spine. The predators could dredge that volatile temperament back up, stirring emotions long forgotten.

My therapist listened to my recounting of events via video log, and occasional surprise flashed across her face. Dr. Bahri wound up working with other predator disease patients, besides myself, on alien worlds, after learning of our mental practices. I was relieved to have someone to talk to about what we found on Talsk, and the perceived fairness of the punishment that Terrans meted out. True to my word, I had gifted the meatiest revelations to Cilany, as soon as we reached the ship.

"We rush out of the Archives, 22 additional civilians in tow. There's no telling if we'll meet resistance, or what's happened above-world. Focus on the task at hand, they tell us, all that," I sighed. "Let's gloss right over humans from 200 years ago, being preserved in an icebox…though I might circle back to some questions for you. My point is, we surface and establish communications; I was thrilled to not be trapped within the water."

UN Command had ordered us to return to our submarine; it wasn't

clear then why no Farsul were waiting for us, or whether they'd attempt to pick off departing vessels. Aerosub shuttles had been prepped to rejoin the space fleet, and the crew had been loaded off one craft at a time. It ended up as a cramped voyage, with four additional bodies to squeeze inside our transport. Hunter had grown morose, perhaps with the full brunt of the shock hitting him. The young predator hardly looked around as we scaled the atmosphere, though there'd been a flash of awe when we could survey the planet's breadth.

Hunter must feel the way I'm feeling, but tenfold worse. Learning that aliens exist, waking up far from home, and having proper technology thrown in his face. Not the mention that he's lost everything that mattered to him.

"Sorry for the dramatic pause, Doc, just talking it through in my head. Anyhow, we flew back up without incident. Locals didn't come for us, and I was worried the moon did some serious damage." I chewed at my claws as I continued, still struggling to believe the Archives' discoveries. "Yeah, the UN dislodged *a fucking moon*. I was briefed on what happened when we got back to the ship. The Farsul used some serious firepower to break it up into tiny pieces."

The therapist's binocular eyes bore into me. "So this…falling satellite burned up in the atmosphere?"

"Took a concentrated effort, but they stopped it. You humans assumed they'd be able to smash it up in time. In the time that the Farsul were hurling missiles and ships at the unexpected meteorite, the Terran military established itself in orbital formation around Talsk. Weapons primed, demanding unconditional surrender. That's how we got off-world without a hitch."

The humans' ultimatum had been explicit: for the generations of suffering inflicted on trillions of sapients, the Farsul States could no longer be allowed to exist. The leadership had the choice to surrender the entire planet to the predators' mercy, or to face certain annihilation via orbital bombardment. The Farsul elders had a day to discuss the proposition; additionally, any aggressive action toward our military would nullify the countdown. Unlike the Krakotl's infamous "self-sacrifice", Terrans wagered that Talsk would elect for self-preservation.

I didn't know how the humans could have the manpower for another ground occupation; two vassal states already presented a tremendous strain on their resources.

Our ascent back to the ship went unchallenged, as the Farsul fleet had stood down, awaiting deliberations. It was clear from Fahl and Sillis that the United Nations allowed surrendering states to survive; the enemy could anticipate that they'd be unharmed. Our crew stayed on duty in case of an attack, until official word came through. The objectives of our ship's mission had changed, with the sudden need to return rescued civilians to Earth. Once Talsk was handled, it was likely we'd ferry the reawakened predators home.

Cryogenically frozen members of other species had been recovered too, but only the Federation's additions from recent centuries; the supply of ancient races like Gojids, Venlil, and Krakotl was long since expended. I felt like there was something Terrans were omitting from that list. My thoughts again shifted to Hunter, wondering how the brown-haired human was doing. The civilians had been confined to a specific wing of crew quarters, reserved for diplomatic envoys or unexpected additions. Captain Monahan hadn't wanted the primitives disrupting military activities, while we were occupying hostile territory. I thought that was a wise decision; having Onso gawking at basic machines was enough.

Dr. Bahri cleared her throat. "Venlil Prime to Sovlin? I can't let you retreat into your head, and get swept away in your thoughts. Let's focus on what happened. What was the Farsul's response to those demands?"

"The United Nations' terms were accepted," I murmured. "I didn't know what we had in store for them, but it was laden with conditions. The elders and high-ranking leaders were to surrender, so that they could be brought to Earth for a trial along with the captured archivists. I was surprised that all but two elders turned themselves in…those two were found in their offices with, ah, self-inflicted demises, per recon drones."

"What else was asked of the Farsul? I don't imagine that is it."

"The United Nations sent transports to collect all predator disease patients, political prisoners or dissenters, and foreign diplomats or visitors. I didn't understand what we were doing, but even with local assistance, it took days to round up everyone we wanted. A

few of those departees were allocated to our ship, actually, and stowed in a separate wing from the primitives—sorry, outdated humans."

A stern breath seeped from her lips. "Erase the word primitive from your vocabulary. It's demeaning and unhelpful."

"Sorry, Doctor. My point is, Terrans wanted to retrieve everyone they deemed innocent off-world, because they didn't intend for anyone else to leave Talsk again."

"How so?"

My eyes rolled back in my head, as I recalled the scene in the viewport. The UN fleet had moved a number of useless objects into Talsk's orbit, and caused them to either disintegrate or collide with artificial satellites. The humans hadn't been satisfied with the resulting debris field, so they lugged more space junk into the planet's vicinity. Carlos referred to the concept as "Kessler Syndrome", and Onso chimed in that cascading collisions would continue for centuries. It was a self-sustaining chain that would only worsen with time.

That was when the Terrans proclaimed their terms, with a righteous indignation that only they could muster. The Farsul lost their right to roam the stars, with their revocation of autonomy for other races and their cultural genocide of hundreds of worlds. The predators intended for no ship to leave Talsk again, and thus, rendered space-flight impossible. These conspirators would be confined to their own world, imprisoned by a tomb of debris, indefinitely.

"The UN shot down a bunch of satellites, creating an impenetrable cloud of trash sealing the world's inhabitants in. I shudder thinking how humans even dreamed up such a consequence." My spines laid flat, despite my unease; it was becoming normal, to witness how devious the predators could be. "We left nothing to chance. FTL disruptors were set up in the world's bounds, multiple, in case one failed. UN ships would patrol the system, in case the Farsul ever tried to launch anything or cleanse their orbit."

"I presume existing weaponry was accounted for?"

"Military installations on Talsk were destroyed, before we created the cage. Orbital defense stations were surrendered to the jurisdiction of the UN, to be used or salvaged as we desire. The

elders ordered the colonies and their forces to stand down—compliance with the Terrans' round-up was mandatory on the homeworld. Just like that, a founding member of the Federation is no longer spacefaring. Depending on humanity's wishes, they might not ever be again."

"How do you feel about that, Sovlin?"

"Well, Carlos tried to tell Sam there's innocent civilians that got caught in the crossfire. Sam said they took the ones who stood up for you, the dissenters and the fellow victims, and the others should be grateful that they were allowed to continue living. Something along those lines."

"I asked how *you* feel."

"It's complicated. When I talked with Cilany, we remembered giving Sam a hard time about humans' animal testing. I felt sick, at the thought of using a creature as a toy, even for medicinal purposes. After meeting Hunter, I am coming to realize that you were never savage monsters, living solely for carnage. So the Farsul did testing…experiments on genuine sapients, without any healing purpose in mind. Stopping your predation isn't noble enough to justify it."

"If I'm understanding you, it follows that you're now unsure the experimentation on Gojids was justified."

"I despise my ancestry! Yet I can't imagine how I'd feel, in Hunter's paws. Did ancient humans *really* have to name their kids 'Hunter', by the way?"

"That name still exists, Sovlin. You'd have to ask why his parents specifically felt drawn to it, but I imagine it was a…wild, adventurous appeal."

"I'm just saying, that's comically predatory. Holy Protector. Anyhow, Talsk's fate is unlike anything that's ever occurred, but I think the punishment is fair. The Farsul species will go on, untampered with, and that's more than you can say for the rest of us."

The human therapist didn't mask her pleasure, hearing me frame meddling in a species' affairs as a negative. Her sharp eyes dialed in on me, and she palmed her ebony chin. I could feel her pupils through the screen, tugging what else was on my mind out of me.

That was a simple quandary. After we left Farsul territory, the ancient humans were allowed to leave their quarters. However, we would be arriving at Earth soon, and I hadn't seen Hunter throughout the return journey.

Despite him being a primitive predator, I can't help but to think of him as a kid that I'm worried about. Perhaps he wants time to himself, so I don't know if I should try to visit.

"Hunter hasn't left his room, not even for mealtimes." I leaned back in my chair, fidgeting with concern. "The UN leaves care packages outside the guests' doors, and those have disappeared so…I know he's handling his basic needs. I don't know how he'd feel about me barging in, or if I'd even be helpful. Maybe someone like Onso would be better, you know, since they both grew up without technology, and the Yotul is even more primitive than him."

The psychologist issued a sharp cough, and leveled a forceful stare at my skull. "*Sovlin.*"

"Oh, for fuck's sake! How much can you really expect of me? Just let me finish—the uplift has his own cryopod human, and's been running her ear off instead of me, which is good. I'm glad to have a break from him. But that means Hunter is my responsibility…I don't know what to do, and I don't want to ask anyone else. Does he want to talk? Do I help him out during our shore leave on Earth?"

"Hunter must be extremely lonely and confused; I'd be happy to fit him into my schedule, if that was something he wanted down the road. What a unique set of circumstances. Why don't you knock on his door, and ask if he'd like to speak with you? That's the quickest way to find out whether he wants space, and how deep of a rut he's in."

"Okay. Then what?"

"From there, assuming he's receptive to your presence, you can offer to bring him up to speed on Earth and modern amenities. Do *not* thumb your nose at him, or talk down to him. That's the least helpful attitude you can have. Be kind. Listen."

"Those are not my specialties."

"You were a good father to Hania, Sovlin, and a good teacher to Recel. You know how to be supportive, and you know how to be a

mentor."

"You're right. Thank you."

"Of course. Our time is up, but please, reach out if Hunter is in a crisis. Go speak to him."

"Will do. Take care, Doctor."

The human terminated the video call, and I hopped out of my chair without hesitation. Procrastinating wouldn't make it any easier to reach out to Hunter; I'd fret over the ancient predator's wishes regardless of when I took this first step. When he first woke up from the pod, I'd promised to do anything I could to help, despite my cluelessness on how to accomplish that. It was my responsibility, as a representative of the UN, to coax him to adapt.

Even if it wasn't my job, I pity the ordeal he's been through. Maybe I can find more "small steps" for him to take, once we land on Earth. I can try to be his friend.

After my lengthy stint aboard this ship, it was no challenge to find my way around. I could discern which humans were primitive civilians and which ones were military crew by who paid me any attention; most ancients weren't quite used to aliens walking around yet. The designated quarters were tucked near the rear of the ship, with little to offer in the way of luxury. My gaze landed on an unassuming door, which was assigned to Hunter. I drew a nervous breath, and rapped my claws against the frame.

"Hunter? It's Sovlin," I called out. "I don't mean to bother you or invade your privacy, but…it's been awhile, and I wanted to see if you're alright. I can go away if you—"

The door swung open, and a disheveled Hunter blinked red, puffy eyes. The human pressed a hand to the frame, leaning his body weight forward; I could see him wiping snot from his nose with the other. Scruff had taken up residence on his chin, a sign that he'd abandoned his grooming habits. Behind him, I could see the deep indentation in his twin-sized mattress that suggested he'd hardly left his bed.

Hunter cleared his throat, before speaking in a voice scratchy from disuse. "Hey."

"We're almost home, to Earth. A few hours away."

“Yeah. Cool, I guess.”

“I was worried about you…I looked for you in the mess hall and the rec room, but never saw you. I assumed you want to be alone.”

“I just don’t have much energy, man. It all hit me like a freight train, and I miss everyone so much it hurts. Didn’t even get to say goodbye. Going home is a daunting prospect, there’s a war with literal aliens, and I have pretty much nothing to live for, when you think about it. And I thought about it. I had my whole life ahead of me, mapped out and doing stuff I loved, but now it’s just a question mark.”

“Fuck that. Find a way to do the stuff you loved. What if you tell me about your past, about you, and I’ll help you wade into this scary future? I promised I’d do what I could, and I meant it.”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to have fun anymore.”

“Then my mission is to make you smile. Just so you know, teeth-baring is a sign of aggression from every species but yours. A lot of people saw it as a sign that humans were hostile.”

Hunter couldn’t help but grin at the absurdity. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“There’s the smile! Not kidding though. I don’t exactly do jokes, so Sovlin comedy won’t be on your itinerary. What do you say about seeing your homeworld from the bridge, and getting a tour of the ship? My human friends told me, at your time, not very many people saw Earth from space. The grandness of it all is magical. You can be one of the earliest people to witness it, sort of.”

“Okay. I don’t see why not…stretch my legs, at least.”

I grabbed the human’s hand, pulling him down the hallway; that action seemed to take him by surprise, and earned stares from passing crew. Hunter couldn’t have the opportunity to withdraw back to his room. He needed a push to adjust to his new circumstances, and to witness the novel, beautiful things surrounding him. Life returned to his amber gaze, as we hustled through the ship passageways. I released his palm at the bridge, and gestured with a sweep of my paw toward the viewport.

FTL travel was done in staggered, pre-approved increments within the Sol system, as a wide berth was considered restricted space since Earth’s attack. This time, Hunter took a good look at the

starry night sky and the outer planets; icy rings surrounded a dust-colored world, a massive giant that we passed by. The ancient human released a shrill noise, which I'd learned was a whistle. On Talsk, he'd been too dispirited to appreciate orbital bodies. Now, he could witness the striking majesty of his native Sol's great expanse.

I passed the captain's chair, currently-unoccupied, and approached the viewport. Wonder lit up the predator's amber gaze; Hunter followed me closer to the screen. He reached out with a hand, as if he felt he could touch the planet. Moisture saturated his reddened-eyes, and he dropped his arm back to his side in wordless awe. I drifted my claw across the abyssal blackness on the display, pointing to a faint blue dot.

"That's your home. A tiny beacon in a dark universe," I breathed.

Hunter pawed his tears away. "There's no place like home."

I stood next to the human, as we peered out at the Sol system's contents. With the success of my stargazing idea, it seemed more plausible that I could help the misplaced predator. Once we arrived at Earth, I could fulfill my promise to help him navigate the staggering changes that had transpired. My mission was teaching one Terran about his people's achievements in the past centuries, and guiding him through the current landscape of his homeworld.

A lot had changed since Hunter was last on this planet, but I was determined that we'd tackle the present reality together.

Chapter 131

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: February 1, 2137

Tyler Cardona solved our logistical issues, with the plan to show Hunter around Earth; he invited us to lodge at his apartment in Columbus. The blond officer was slated to handle some interrogations of the Archives personnel during the days, but otherwise was free for shore leave like the rest of us. Oddly, Marcel's friend was non-specific about the specifics of those questioning sessions; yet again, I got the impression there was something I didn't know about the people taken from the base. Tyler only stated that it was better the less I was made aware of.

If the humans were torturing Farsul staff, I couldn't blame them for succumbing to fury. Earth couldn't afford negative public relations now, though, from what I heard. Rumblings reached my ears, as we departed Monahan's ship, that the United Nations was planning a massive diplomatic convention. Venlil Prime was especially shaken by the news that the Federation had performed drastic alterations on them, and the issue had taken front and center in their election. I wondered if these discoveries would be what toppled the Kolshian-Farsul conspiracy for good.

The Farsul won't be around on the galactic stage anymore, regardless; they're banished to their homeworld for the foreseeable future. The duration of the war, at the minimum.

After a rough night's sleep on a water mattress, I awoke to the sound of a slamming fridge door. Hunter was already awake, and Tyler was showing him the icebox's contents. Did ancient Terrans have the concept of freezing food, or did they worry about spoilage at all, with fresh prey available for consumption? It would become evident quite soon how advanced (or not) the 1960s human was. I wished again that the Yotul, Tyler's exchange partner, was here to manage the primitive-minded aspects of this stay on Earth.

"Everyone likes mac n' cheese. See, I can cook!" Officer Cardona strode over to a microwave and popped the door open. He then fumbled with the packaging box, sliding a small carton out. "That

work for you, Hunter?"

The ancient predator squinted at the box, staring at the ice crystals within. "You eat this…cold? Oh shit, is that one of those fancy microwave things? I heard those irradiate your food, and take all the nutrients out. Hell, I even heard the Soviets use it for mind control."

"Don't be ridiculous," I chimed in. "It heats up water molecules. It's basic science."

"It's like putting nuclear fallout in your food!"

"The radiation isn't ionized. And mind control? Were your people st __"

Tyler coughed, before sliding the tray into the microwave. "Let me just punch a few buttons. It's perfectly safe, I promise. We've had hundreds of years to see if it's not, y'know?"

"Exactly. Regardless, why would humans ever think something so crazy and unfounded?!"

"Says the one raised in the Federation."

"Ouch, Tyler. You're comparing Dossur to Mazics there."

"It was a different time. Humans had less refined views on…many things. Like the Captain told you, we had enough nukes pointed at each other to end civilization in one go. Isn't that right, Hunter?"

The brown-haired primate nodded. "Yeah. You see, the Soviets want to destroy democracy itself—they'd like it if we're all communists! When I was in school, we did drills of nuclear attacks, and the teachers had us hide under desks."

I couldn't avoid gaping in horror, as a mental image materialized. Had humans really taught their children that they could be irradiated at any time, the way the Federation did with predator attacks? The rhetoric would sound paranoid and unhinged, if there hadn't been a very real threat of nuclear annihilation. I couldn't imagine living in a world where the possibility of self-inflicted extinction loomed over their heads. What was the point of hiding under a desk against *an atomic bomb?*

Furthermore, the translator took its time chewing on the first part Hunter said, before conveying "communism" as a classless society. It wasn't evident to me what that had to do with democracy, but

Hunter spat the term with disgust. Carlos' words from back at Sillis, about not viewing others as people, rang in my ears. Perhaps this nuclear standoff originated from an ideological rift? It sounded like this "Soviet" tribe, a name I'd never heard before, were viewed as the enemy in Hunter's territory.

"What's bad about a classless society?" I queried. "Wouldn't equality be a good thing?"

The microwave dinged, but Hunter's eyes were boring into my skull. "Oh fuck, are the aliens commies? Did…did the Soviets win? We didn't try hard enough to sniff 'em out…shit, they'd kill me for criticizing them and all. Lay it on me, Sovlin."

"I didn't know Earthlings…killed people for free speech? I have no idea who these 'Soviet' people are, and I have no equivalent for the word communism. From what my translator says, it sounds like an unattainable ideal. If ancient humans knew how to have everyone get by, I am all ears. I joined our military to provide for my family; it was a well-paying, respectable career."

"Sovlin, most countries today have lax laws on speech, and you won't be taken to the handful that don't." Tyler placed the steaming food by Hunter, handing him a plastic fork. "You can say whatever you like about humans and our government. It's considered a basic right."

Hunter pushed waxy yellow food around with his silverware. "You've never heard of the Soviets?!"

"Sovlin has no reason to know them. The Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the twentieth century. Broke into several independent countries."

"That's righteous! And now that I think about it, the Aussie called me a 'Yank', so USA still exists?"

"Correct."

"Unreal. I was surprised you let a chick carry a gun…she sure didn't act very ladylike. Must be distracting, having eye candy around on the battlefield. The tongue on that one…seemed like a shrew."

I flinched with surprise, hearing such objectifying and belittling remarks from the primitive predator. The blond human looked appalled, and his eyebrows arched up with disgust. Officer Cardona's fists clenched and unclenched, while his teeth baring

seemed like the unfriendly kind. Reading between the lines, I could sense that ancient Terrans didn't believe females belonged in certain professions. It also sounded like Sam's speech patterns didn't align with the passivity Hunter viewed as fitting.

Did the males see themselves as better, due to a higher propensity toward physical strength? Maybe Earth truly wasn't a charitable society when we observed them.

"The fuck did you just say?" Tyler hissed.

Hunter chewed on a mouthful of food. "What? I mean, it's bonkers. They're the fairer sex. Pretty girl like that belongs at home, not fighting aliens on another planet."

"Look, I know that was the prevailing thought in your times, but you better drop that idea quick. You're gonna get some teeth knocked out, if you don't. If Sam's capable of doing the job and willing to take the risks, why shouldn't she serve? It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from. Everyone has an equal chance to prove themselves nowadays."

"You're getting hot under the collar there. I only want to protect women! Was polite to her when she was around. I didn't mean for you to come unglued or anything…like I told Sovlin, I don't belong here. Clearly culture isn't the same."

"You call denigrating half of humanity cultural?" I growled.

Tyler palmed his head. "Tolerance is part of what I meant about 'less refined views.' It's no different from you calling us predators and your insults toward Onso. It's not an excuse, but I don't think Hunter knows better…stems from a place of ignorance."

There must've been recent changes in humans as a species after all, so I gleaned some insight into how the Federation could frame pre-FTL Earth as an uncivilized world. Perhaps Hunter had some problematic views from his upbringing, though I didn't imagine it could be that difficult to show him the errors in his thinking. There were some positives in notions he espoused, such as democracy and the right to critical speech. On a separate note, Tyler's arguments about my predator hatred being similar fell flat; that was related to personal trauma.

Why would anyone else cling to biases, when shown the flaws in their thought? Especially a primitive waking up…Hunter should realize he

needs to catch up with more enlightened minds.

Hunter abandoned his half-eaten meal, and padded over to the couch with a frustrated look. He cradled his head in his hands, breathing a flustered sigh. The human snatched a remote, but looked confused by the sea of buttons on the touch interface. He set it back on the coffee table, wringing his hands in frustration. Tears welled in his eyes, which I suspected was his overwhelming dread returning. I found myself a spot next to him, and picked up the remote.

"I'm not gonna make it a day here," Hunter groaned. "My opinions seem to be an issue."

I switched on the streaming services. "Oh, have I ever been there. I'm still there! It's hard to know that there's a problem with your thinking, when it's how you were taught. If you're open-minded and you try to be kind, it'll all work out."

"Tyler thinks I'm ignorant…"

"Let's drop the subject, and revisit how, er, societal norms have… changed later. Why don't you tell me what you were studying in school?"

"I was getting an economics degree. First person in my family to go to college, didn't wanna work on a farm forever. Studying the markets and managing finances, the ebb and flow of the entire system…I enjoyed it. Your turn. Why did you wind up joining humanity's cause after your planet fell?"

"I did *terrible* things fighting against Earth, because I hated predators and I wanted you to suffer. I turned myself in when I realized you were genuine people."

"What terrible things did you do? Like Hitler stuff?"

"Like…who? Wait, I heard that name when that Coth abomination was talking about the Arxur's 'Prophet.'"

"A ruthless, murderous despot, Sovlin, a name spoken with disgust on Earth to this day," Tyler chimed in. "Both of you shouldn't ask about topics that will cause only anguish."

Hunter narrowed his eyes. "Uh…was Sovlin actually like that?!"

"No. He tortured a POW. I'm not making excuses for him, but Marcel…the victim agrees that Sovlin has suffered immensely for

his acts, and wants him forgiven."

"Wow…honestly, knowing his background, I was expecting something a lot worse. Next question. What are those rectangle graphics you're cycling through on the TV?"

I glanced down at my paw, realizing I was skimming through the humans' media collection on autopilot. The fact that Hunter glossed right over my crimes made me wonder what the metrics for evil were back in his times. From what Tyler said and past comparisons to Arxur figures, it stood to reason that Earth was once home to predators of unfathomable cruelty. Most Terrans possessed even-keel dispositions and were emotional creatures, but the savage outliers could gain power then. Laws and morals weren't as stringent on a societal scale, or so I was beginning to gather.

"This is a streaming service. That's where that 'video stream' phrase came from earlier. It has a collection of movies and shows that you browse," I explained.

Hunter's eyes widened. "And you can watch any of them?! There's…hundreds of options!"

"Thousands, more like. Every film known to man is on one subscription service or another." Tyler moseyed over from the kitchen, gnawing on a breakfast bar. He plopped himself into a reclining chair. "Stop and start it at your leisure, binge watch an entire TV season if you want, no ads on the full tiers. Cable hasn't existed at all for over fifty years."

"That's unreal. You have unlimited…constant entertainment. The pictures on those, uh, movie reels look so clear too! We had *three* TV channels, and you watched whatever was on. Primetime just switched fully to color this year…what was 'this year' for me."

"Are you saying your television wasn't in color?!" I asked in bewilderment. "How do you have a visual show without using any colors? Was it just an audio 'show', like a podcast?"

"A what? Is podcast like radio?"

Tyler jumped in. "Yes, but it's accessed by episode at leisure. And Sovlin, TV in its early days was in black-and-white…monochrome, if you know that word."

"I see," I breathed. *I've never heard of such a primitive visual medium.* "Well, why don't we pick out a movie?"

“You just passed *Satellite Wars* with Manny Griffin! I love that movie; we can give you and Hunter a history crash course.”

Mimicking a human shrug, I clicked on the title Tyler mentioned. Studio introductions gave way to a burning fire, before the camera panned up to a missile slamming into a power station’s smokestacks. Screams were echoing through the air, as panicked actors ran across the screen. The camera cut to a predator that I vaguely recognized from the *Escape from the Cradle* promos, who had a panicked look in his binocular eyes. Dirt and grime was smeared across his oily skin.

Holy shit! Why would they show what’s basically a raid in such vivid detail? You can see the missiles hit!

The lead actor, likely Manny Griffin, was helping a half-conscious human limp along. Orange light detonated behind them, and the two primates went flying. The camera dropped to the ground, turning blurry as a ringing sound echoed through the speakers. My spines were bristling from the intensity of the scene. The fog cleared from the lens, showing Terran hands fumbling to get up.

The shot followed Manny, who was calling out the missing comrade’s name. The human’s eye whites suddenly became glaring; it was a look of primal horror, before he skidded over to a shrapnel pile. I shrieked, realizing the actor was kneeling by a bloodied corpse. The violence was graphic and uncensored, photorealistic even! A pole punctured through the fallen primate’s heart, and purple-red liquid soaked through his white shirt. I averted my eyes, trying not to throw up while Manny issued a despairing wail on screen.

“Oh my…they actually showed the injury!” Hunter had gasped at the gory sight as well, despite supposedly being from a more violent Earth than Tyler. “That looks real. That’s…worse than *Psycho*.”

I kept my gaze on the floor. “T-that is a sick thing to show the audiences, in the opening scene no less. They didn’t show blood in your time, Hunter?”

“Not many did…it was pretty taboo. Brutality shouldn’t be depicted in detail.”

Tyler paused the movie, scratching his scalp. “Maybe this was a bad idea. This is about the human cost of the Sat Wars, so there’s a lot

of stuff getting destroyed and chaos."

"I see why you humans censor your movies around us," I grumbled. "I can't believe a pri—ancient Terran has a better take on immortalizing brutality than you! Though I shouldn't be surprised, when you play games about shooting other humans."

"He does what?!" Hunter demanded. "Man, what is wrong with you? Are you a serial killer, to even call that a game?"

The blond Terran snorted. "For fuck's sake, I feel like I'm talking to Sovlin. It's adrenaline, a power fantasy, and it's a normal pastime nowadays!"

"Please tell me you're joking. This planet is *nothing* like the one I left. There's no wading into the future; it's more having an ocean of madness dropped on my head!"

Hunter had his nose scrunched with disgust, though this time, I agreed with his input. The display of violence modern Terrans treated as entertainment was revolting. The primitive primate stalked off to the guest room, and Tyler watched him leave. So far, I'd failed in my promise to help the out-of-time predator integrate with his homeworld. I'd only learned disturbing things about his time period and views, yet Officer Cardona still managed to surpass Hunter's violence tolerance.

Humans are exhausting. How can one species be such an enigma, and have such an extensive collection of sordid oddities?

Hunter's response to bloodshed afforded a definitive answer to his thoughts on violence, and willingness to perpetrate it himself in a bind. He would've gotten sick boarding the cattle ship back at the cradle, just as Carlos had! Despite understanding his backward worldview better now, I had no idea how to help him adjust to the norms of the modern era. Whatever the reawakened Terran said, this *was* only wading into Earth's offerings; there were greater extremes on the scales of both technology and entertainment than we saw today.

"We haven't even introduced him to every alien species, and the history of the galaxy yet," I remarked to Tyler. "We haven't tried to locate his current relatives. From the stuff in your apartment alone, he's having a reaction to just about everything."

The blond human sighed. "Just about everything has changed. The

hand of progress moves things forward, y'know? You and I would be lost 150 years in the future too."

"Forget the future. I'm lost in the present."

"Hey, you're not alone in that. It's hard thinking for yourself. But you're part of the whole 'hand of progress' now. 150 years from now, I want us to still be here and the Kolshians to not."

"You and me both. We'll have to see what comes of your hush-hush diplomatic convention. Maybe the Archives will change things."

"I don't know much, man. I'm sure it'll be broadcasted back home, when it goes down. Some alien hotshots are coming into town, and the UN's silence is more about figuring out how to sell it to the Humanity First crowd. The truth about the uplifting shit has all of our allies rattled though, so we gotta seize the day."

"The Venlil must be losing their minds. I wonder how Slanek is doing."

Tyler's eyes darkened. "I know the answer to that. It's not my business to say more, but Slanek…isn't well. Not to mention, the Battle of Mileau is *still* ongoing, deadlocked."

That declaration made my heart sink, as I recalled how angry Marcel's exchange partner had been after my appearance. The Venlil had been through tremendous trauma, bouncing between grueling battlefields and watching a friend's torture. Part of whatever was hurting him was my fault. The new revelations about Venlilkind could have been the stressor that tipped the scale, and lent to a full-on breakdown.

There was nothing I could do to help Slanek and Marcel, however; I had to focus on the person I could still make a positive impact for. There had to be options available to aid Hunter in fitting in, and learning the proper etiquette of our time. Humans were fundamentally different all those years ago, in some ways. Good traits worth salvaging existed within him nonetheless, so I wasn't going to write him off as a savage predator yet.

Chapter 132

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: February 2, 2137

The insurgency landed some major gains against Betterment, after successful plots with infiltrators on Wriss. Improvised explosives targeted shipyards, government buildings, and military barracks, with human intelligence disseminating ways to homebrew such munitions. It took several detonations for Arxur officials to catch onto the package bomb tactics, which flattened a few offices; one took out a wing of Prophet-Descendant Giznel's palace, though unfortunately, the government's head wasn't around.

My job was selecting which ships to assign to liberate cattle from various sectors. Of course, the last thing I wanted was for the Arxur populace to starve; however, if Betterment failed to fill the citizenry's stomach anymore, and the rebellion was teeming with food, it pushed more recruits into our arms. Risking our lives to rescue prey was not something I would've dreamt up of my volition, but I was trying to entice the UN to see us as honorable allies. Blowing thousands of herbivores out of the sky to "liberate" them would earn a disapproving nod from Zhao's people, so we turned to piracy tactics instead.

Successful missions led to my people returning cattle, with no demands made, to a Terran subsidiary. The rescued herbivores must've been confused to see Arxur in a gunfight amongst themselves, and then handing them off to a free society. We received a warm reception as we docked at the human worlds; I didn't know that the primates had the manpower to attend to rescues, but they would find some place for the livestock. After those positive deeds, we talked the Earthlings into providing air support, when we offered to raid a cattle world in the Mazic's sector.

Zhao is still leery of taking on the Dominion, especially since Giznel is targeting my faction rather than Earth. Supposedly, the Battle of Mileau had mixed results…a stalemate in the kindest interpretation. I don't know how humanity can hope to take Aafa, let alone Wriss.

Our task was to survive and create chaos, for as long as was necessary. The downfall of the Dominion wasn't going to happen overnight. Still, it was rejuvenating not to have to perform cruel actions to retain my title, and to see other defectives living open lives. The clips the United Nations forwarded from the Archives validated that empathetic dispositions were once common. Before Betterment began culling "weak" individuals, Wriss touted a number of creative talents and ethical camps!

Selecting for violence and aggression weeded out the vibrant emotions that we once possessed; while we were a solitary species, we aspired to higher ideals. Wriss had been excited to learn from alien cultures, and the Farsul narrators seemed confused about whether our peace offer was ever genuine. Immense sorrow crashed down on me, realizing what our race once was. Perhaps we could be sophisticated sapients, devoted to reason and honor, once more.

Zhao vaguely mentioned an additional Archives discovery pertaining to Wriss' past, but claimed that he hadn't decided what to do with it yet. I wasn't sure what to make of that statement. The Secretary-General promised to explain the missing tidbit down the line, so in the interest of placating humanity, I opted not to push for answers. If it was vital to the war efforts, the information would've been passed along with the initial package.

"Good morning! Lisa, Isif, please provide your daily, 'You were right about everything, Olek' statement!" The conspiracy theorist human bore a sickly-sweet grin, and I wished I could smack the smug expression off his face with my tail. "I guess the Federation abducting humans wasn't that crazy, now was it?"

Lisa huffed in irritation. "It's been weeks since the Archives raid. Are you going to bring this up every day? How many times do you need us to stroke your ego?"

"You told me every day that I'm crazy, and detached from reality, so I expect an equal number of acknowledgments of how wrong you were. Even *after* I was spot on about the Feds doing gene probing on their own lot, nobody thought, 'Hey, maybe Olek's onto something, they'd do it to us too!'"

"A broken clock is right twice a day. So you've been right twice, and you're still a broken clock. I'm still waiting for the death ray predictions to pan out."

“Well, that’s different. Human institutions are better at covering up conspiracies, so you gotta look at the facts. Follow the money!”

“You’re insufferable,” I jumped in. “What do you get out of all this baseless speculation, leaf-licker?”

Felra twitched her whiskers. “Olek doesn’t trust people. Can I tell Siffy why?”

“I guess,” the human grumbled.

“His parents were pronounced as dead in a car crash, but he never got to see the bodies. They were reporters. He thinks the government, his or otherwise, made them disappear.”

“I…kinda thought they were abducted by aliens, but it doesn’t seem the Feddies visited Earth recently. So that leaves human players. You see, the elites just want to keep power, and they do that by ensuring that we mindlessly consume and follow their narratives. The game is rigged from the start, but they want us to keep playing!”

Lisa pursed her lips. “Olek…I don’t know how to say this, but did you ever think their bodies weren’t fit for burial? That…they didn’t recover them intact? Your relatives might’ve kept that knowledge from you.”

“The relatives who wouldn’t take me in, and sent me to a group home? Ah, yes, those people definitely had my best interests at heart.”

“Maybe the bodies were burned,” Felra offered. “I had a classmate who got killed in a predator attack, on school property. The exterminators torched the defiled body, and the entire building.”

The humans and I stared at the Dossur with the same amount of bewilderment, processing her story. What predator managed to sneak into an urbanized children’s facility? Why did the prey creatures insist on burning anything that so much as looked at a predator? It wasn’t clear what happened to Olek’s parents, but I could guarantee that the leaf-licking primates wouldn’t do something so moronic. Granted, corpses could be vectors for disease transmission, but this hardly sounded like an issue of public health.

I thought empathetic creatures mourned their loved ones in ritualistic fashion? That Dossur’s parents would accept the exterminators burning the remains of their child?

“We don’t do that.” Lisa was blinking in rapid succession, as though something occurred to her. “We perform autopsies on violent deaths. Why would the exterminators burn the bodies?”

Felra twitched her whiskers. “The predator’s saliva and DNA is on the body.”

“You didn’t answer her question, rodent,” I growled.

“What if those…chemicals, got into the water supply, or were absorbed into the soil and then to plants? It could cause a dangerous strain of predator disease. It was clearly from a savage monster, after all.”

“This is the most unscientific, sniveling nonsense I’ve heard from a leaf-licker! So you’re saying because I picked you up with my claws, you contracted predator disease and need to be burned? I am…a contaminant to you?”

“It’s plenty verifiable. Being around predators made me want to try carcass food, so it does prove their point. It’s worth it to me; besides, you’re a good predator. I told you I thought there were harmless predator disease strains, and you’re harmless!”

“I am NOT harmless! That is insulting to say, Felra. I am a fearsome hunter—murderers and marauders cower at my name.”

Lisa feigned a yawn. “You’re melty on the inside. And for the record, that’s not an insult. It’s a good thing to have a heart. Have you noticed humans don’t like cruel monsters? My sister had me convinced you were people-eating menaces, until I met you.”

“You showed us both that Arxur can be different,” Felra said. “I thought you were gonna eat me, but then I saw you really cared! More than anyone else I’ve known. I’m sure now more than ever that nobody deserves to be alone.”

“Felra and you are just adorable together! Now, I’ve led some teams for the UN, some sensitive missions, but a rebellion like this…you have a cause, an important one. That means something. I like you because you stand for an ideal.”

My eyes narrowed to slits. “That’s easy for you to say. The Arxur following me would *love* to hear we’re chasing some illusory concept, yes? And I’m sure they’d be thrilled that leaf-lickers like their leader for being defective. I’m harmless, is that not so?”

“It’s okay to care and to have feelings! I know you’re strong, but I don’t think you’d hurt people for no reason…that’s all,” Felra chittered. “Speaking of people you did hurt, where is Kaisal?”

Lisa tilted her head. “Yeah. He should be here by now. He’s usually punctual, so I wonder if something’s wrong with him.”

“Kaisal has been nothing but a negative presence on this bridge, so I’ve asked him to work alone.” I flared my nostrils, simmering at the memories of the runt. “As long he files his reports, I don’t think it’ll be necessary to break his tail again.”

“You sent him away, Siffy? I get that you did it for me, but I don’t want that,” the Dossur squeaked. “Kaisal isn’t the last gray that hates prey that you’ll have to handle. If I’m gonna stick around as your friend, you have to do better.”

“I tried discipline! I tried feeding him well, and giving him power! What do you want me to do, *pet him*?”

“Silly Arxur, I have to be the first sapient you pet! I’ll be jealous if not. Now, we’re gonna go find Kaisy, and we’re gonna be nice to him.”

The two humans shared a glance, before gesturing for Felra and I to go on without them. Judging by that wordless exchange, it was possible they agreed with my exclusion of Kaisal from the group; the scrawny Arxur hadn’t become the open-minded successor that I hoped for, nor had he been helpful as a second. The Dossur truly was deranged, if she thought showing defectiveness to the condescending runt would change his stance. Why did my best friend care about the treatment of someone who viewed her as food?

This is what happens when empathy runs haywire; it is weakness when it’s not contained.

I checked that the Dossur was balanced enough for me to walk, and strolled out of the conference room. Kaisal’s quarters were on the opposite side of our cordoned-off area from my lodgings, which was intended to keep him distanced from Felra during leisure time. Gasping noises reached my sensitive hearing long before we arrived at our destination; I narrowed my eyes with suspicion. Had the scrawny Arxur managed to re-injure himself through incompetence?

I quickened my pace, flinging open the door with slight worry. It

seemed wasteful if anything were to happen to Kaisal, after the effort I'd put into training him. Felra chittered as she noticed the Arxur sniffling, and cocooning himself in a blanket. He appeared to have been sleeping, though he jolted awake after our noisy entry. The runt struggled to collect himself, but mucus still dripped from his nostrils. Before I realized what happened, Felra leapt down onto the bed.

"What's wrong, Kaisal?" I asked, scooping the Dossur back onto my shoulder before she could get eaten. "I have felt sadness and loss before, yes? My understanding will surpass the average Arxur's."

"You're just the latest person to bully or trick me into doing what you want…you're forcing me to tolerate that prey animal even now! Everyone laughs at my weakness. I didn't want to join the war. I tried to defect to Earth, *twice*, and they shipped me back to the Dominion. I'm used and discarded at every turn, and my life is nothing but suffering."

"How can you possibly be suffering? You are well-fed, and elevated to a powerful role, are you not?"

"Being able to feel something other than hunger, it's just as awful as starving. I think about things…I revisit things and it hurts…"

The Dossur attempted to wriggle off my shoulder. "It's called guilt, Kaisal. You can't see me as anything more than a thoughtless animal without feeling it. You blame me for what happened to the Arxur, when you *know* it was the Farsul and the Kolshians. We could be civil with each other."

"I…HATE YOU! You were involved. You helped them make us live like this!"

I lashed my tail. "Don't roar at—"

"Stop, Siffy! I can speak for myself," Felra hissed. "Have you not seen that Betterment were *knowingly* helping the Kolshians, a lot more than any of us? The reason you're starving, and you live like this, is your own government slaughtered your actual animals. They didn't care what happened!"

"I hate them too! Why do you think I defected? But you just squeak and babble on about soft nonsense, every day. You know nothing, and you contribute nothing; you weaken us with your squeaking gibberish!"

The scrawny Arxur kept his head pointed away from us, and his sides heaved with uneven breaths. I was tempted to explode at him for those comments, but Felra shot me a scathing look as I opened my maw. With flaring nostrils, I let her leap off my shoulder. Kaisal hissed with disgust, as the rodent crawled up his arm. Her ginger fur looked bright, compared to the shadowy interior and his gray scales.

"If you don't want to be in a war, we need to make peace. We don't have to like each other," Felra said. "It's time for prey to see predators as people…and predators to see prey as people, *not* food. Nobody should live like we do now; can't you agree to that?"

Kaisal fixed his eyes, which were narrowed to slits, on her. "I hate this war as much as I hate you. Get away from me!"

"So we agree on ending the war? That's a good start. Hey, I know you don't want to be alone. Siffy and I are friends, so you don't have to hate me."

I picked the Dossur up, returning her to my shoulder again. "I…am just trying to make things better, Kaisal, in the only way I know how. If you work with me, and make an effort with Felra, I can enable your success. I do not wish to discard you, but I must protect her. Come back to the briefing, if that is your desire."

"I'll be there in a few moments," the runt grumbled.

I ambled out of his quarters, and moved my pupils toward Felra. The Dossur looked quite pleased with herself; she'd handled herself with more fortitude and discretion than I could've anticipated, given Kaisal's hostility. It was true that other Arxur would share those feelings toward prey, so it would behoove me to discover how to change their opinions now. If Betterment was overthrown, I did wish for the needless war and carnage to cease.

Too many sapients have died and lived wretched lives. With the hatred between our peoples, how could we ever achieve lasting peace?

"I do not think the Federation wants peace, Felra. Convincing the Arxur is easier, and as you can see, that's not easy in the slightest," I remarked.

The Dossur tilted her head. "I've told you multiple times to reach out to the Federation, and make amends for the awful things that have happened. You could get some herbivore allies."

“They do not want to talk to us, yes? I know that is your hope, but it is a fantasy. It is not within the realm of possibility.”

“You don’t know that. You haven’t even tried! Trying worked for the humans.”

“The humans haven’t done what we’ve done, and their ‘allies’ are lukewarm at best…ten percent of the Federation was willing to *consider* not slaughtering them.”

“You could reach out to that ten percent. Send a message to their diplomatic summit. Maybe Zhao would help plead your case!”

“The reason the humans won’t associate with us is twofold—it’s partly because it would kill their reputation with said allies. I wasn’t invited, and I doubt they’d show me to the main location if I turned up at the hand-off. I won’t interfere with their get-together, so get that idea out of your head.”

“Then figure out where they’re having the meeting on your own! You could follow them and try to deliver a message, or at least ask Zhao instead of assuming he—”

“It’s not happening, rodent!”

The Dossur ducked her head, drooping her whiskers in a way that made me feel guilt. The simple fact was that there was no fixing the rift between the Arxur and the rest of the galaxy; the bad blood stemmed from generational trauma and heinous atrocities. No rebellion could depict us as anything other than monsters, except to the humans. Even the primates hadn’t always been sympathetic, due to their open disgust toward our cattle practices.

I could never tolerate the derision the humans had subjected themselves to, regardless. The goal of my rebellion was to undermine the Dominion, not to sing in the streets with leaf-lickers. The best that the Arxur could hope for was the overthrow of Betterment, and a brighter future centuries down the line. If Felra couldn’t get that through her head, she was more delusional than Olek.

Chapter 133

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: February 5, 2137

The election cycle had become more contentious, ever since the truth about the Venlil reached the public's ears. Veln lambasted my proposal for a union with humanity; my re-election platform involved an instinct suppression program that extended to civilians, a vow to hold a referendum on renaming our planet to Skalga officially, and a pledge to strengthen our military under Terran guidance. After what the Federation did, we had to ensure they never got their claws and tentacles on us again. Reversing the gene edits was my top priority. It was too late for the current generation, but Venlil born in the future weren't going to be hobbled and sense-deprived.

Funding scientific research was an action I was already taking; the Federation physically weakening and mocking us…stealing our children, outraged the public. Veln was clever, suggesting that Venlil didn't want humans having the second crack at our genome. The first debate had happened just before I left for the summit, and he claimed that I was making us too dependent on predators we knew for a month. He had stumbled upon a campaign slogan—"No More Federations"—as I prepared to bring us into a new organization.

The polling margins were a few percentage points, with the race neck-and-neck down the home stretch. Many Venlil wanted to stand on their own, and pursue an isolationist policy; I didn't know how to tap into that sentiment without violating my core principles. What could I do to give the appearance of keeping humanity at arm's length, without actually pushing them away? Right now, my focus was exploring the station we were docking on with my delegation. Selling a joint charter to an incensed citizenry could come later.

"The human envoy should've been the first ones there. I don't know how many others have turned up, but we need to lay on the charm and mingle with every species. It's our job to back up the Terrans, put down any bigotry. Am I understood?" I asked.

Kam flicked his ears in acknowledgment. “Yes, ma’am. Not sure where the escort ship has led us, with them jamming our comms and navigations. Think that’s the point—nobody knows where this is happening but them. It’s secure as it can be.”

“I’m here in case Ambassador Coji asks after me, aren’t I?” Glim grumbled. “I can’t believe the Duerten are actually coming.”

I chuckled with disdain. “I don’t think Zhao could believe it either. He practically spat that name when he read the guest list to me. There’s quite a few surprises there…Krakotl separatists were invited. Birla is coming on behalf of *vassalized Sillis!* The Thafki agreed to come too; how Terrans pulled that one off is beyond me, but the Archives sure have galvanized everyone friendly.”

“We’re not going to get an opportunity where so many species are open to the suggestion again,” Cheln, my diplomatic advisor, commented. “I’ve typed up a draft for your speech, Tarva. You need to hammer home that Venlil are herbivores, and were still modified beyond recognition. Tie credit back to the humans for the Archives’ findings.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. My focus is more on one-on-one interactions, and leisure activities. We have days together with galactic leaders, and that means pulling out all the bells and whistles to make the leery parties feel safe and contented. Let’s waste no time, soon as the docking clamps are in; split up and move around.”

A few other high-level diplomats from outside my cabinet were along for the ride too, with leading figures from the exchange program also on the guest list. Every species was allowed up to twenty visitors, though I imagined the host humans would have more than that. Between security concerns and the need for at-length discussions with all parties, there was no way they could manage with meager staffing. I eyed the colossal space station, as we ducked below a hangar’s overhang. Flashing lights illuminated the docking port, though the process of interfacing with the landing pad was automated.

A welcoming party of humans was present in the terminal, standing with personalized gift bags. They were wearing full helmets, complete with translucent flower and fauna décor; it looked like someone had ripped out the pages of a children’s book. The bottom section of the masks seemed to retract as needed, perhaps by brain

pattern recognition. The Terrans could unseal the mouth covering without even touching it, almost like a prosthetic! The one who greeted me unsealed her mask for a moment, revealing a warm smile.

They've been advised that they can act normal around the Venlil. That makes me proud, to know they don't have to hide themselves with me.

"What's in here?" I accepted the gift bag they offered, and pulled out a translucent bottle. Kam scanned it with a visual translator, revealing that it said *Everclear Grain Alcohol*. "Thank you, but you do know your human drinks are watered down compared to ours, right?"

The predator chuckled. "One shot of this stuff can make a human sick, but we still brew it. It's jet fuel. 95% alcohol. Figured it'd be more up your alley."

Glim eyed the bottle with interest. "Finally, something that'll make the bad thoughts go away. Give."

"Not so fast," Kam interjected. "I can't sit through days of this political snoozefest without being inebriated out of my mind. We're sharing."

The human greeter wagged a finger disapprovingly. "Now now, you haven't been here five minutes. Don't you think it's a little early to get wasted?"

"No," Glim answered.

"Governor Tarva, I guess you have to be the responsible one. Whatever you do, don't leave us to talk to the Duerten alone. Uh, you didn't hear me say that. Please, head inside and lend our people a hand. We can take the bottle and the luggage to your quarters."

I passed the bag back to her. "You got it. We'll go say hello to the guests."

A team of Terrans swooped in to unload our belongings, and it occurred to me that parties less comfortable with the Earthlings wouldn't appreciate predators taking possession of their belongings. I swished my tail in gratitude, before following the numerous signs pointing the path to the gallery. The station was new construction, likely having the final coats of paint splashed on in advance of the summit. Hallways and rooms were built with vaulted ceilings to accommodate Mazics, while accessibility ramps and quadruped lifts

were also present.

There's no question this was created as a place to host all species. That lends to the assumption that this is in a system close to Sol.

Hundreds of guests had amassed in the banquet hall, which had a number of tables positioned shy of a stage. Non-alcoholic refreshments and Terran snacks were present, and calming music played throughout the theater. My gaze scanned the social circles that had formed; human diplomats were chatting it up with various leaders. The big names weren't wearing 360-degree helmets. I recognized Sara's curly hair through her mask, before deciding to wander to her group. Cupo, the Mazic president, was listening to her intently, along with the Fissan ambassador and guests from the Gojid party.

"…body appreciates the accomplishments of the scientific community, and I accept that," the female astronaut was explaining, utilizing emphatic hand gestures. "The history books will remember Noah's speech on Aafa, the feats of military grandeur, and the jaw-dropping revelations. The experiments we've done are the foundation for reversal of the cure, or for any of the innovations engineers created for the military. But science is not a spectacle. Intellectual pursuits should *never* be a spectacle."

Halmina, the Fissan, pointed the horn between her eyes at Sara. "The important thing is whether those experiments form the basis for profit, or whether they give humanity a competitive edge. You humans hold your own economically…those contracts you almost got us to sign were sneakily exploitative. Is science able to generate enough revenue to be worth the cost?"

"That's the wrong question. None of the technologies you see as profitable would exist without someone pushing the boundaries, or unlocking a new discovery. I always found a number of fields fascinating, from biology to neurochemistry to geological surveys. What motivated me to pursue two PHDs, and kept me going through the grueling astronaut training, was the better understanding of our universe. The gaps we've filled in our knowledge, in a few months, are remarkable."

"What is remarkable about it, human?" Cupo asked. "You didn't specify what you thought the right question was. I'm still at a loss for what drives your people, even after our work together."

“The right question is simple. Why are we here? What is the purpose of life?”

“I fail to see why that is important, or what it would change in your daily living.”

“Or how it adds anything of value,” Halmina chimed in.

“It sounds like a religious concern, not one of science.” A Gojid I didn’t recognize spoke up, waving her claws idly. “Can you say there’s any purpose, after all the suffering we’ve seen? I’m little more than a de facto leader of our largest colony. I watched my culture disintegrate, my homeworld fall, and the refugees scatter like unwanted rubbish.”

Sara shifted on her feet. “It’s a concrete question as much as a philosophical one. The origins of life, the nature of our reality, it mystifies us…it defies all comprehension. We thought finding other lifeforms would put our role in the universe in perspective.”

“Well?” I strolled up to the circle, tapping the human on the leg with my tail. “Did it give you the answers you hoped for?”

“No. To be honest, we hoped that aliens would be enlightened, and they would show us a better way of living. Instead, we found a galaxy just as cruel as what we knew. I understand how Gojid Minister Kiri can struggle to find meaning, but maybe it’s up to us to make our own meaning. Free will means that this suffering doesn’t have to be all there is. Science can lead us beyond our current problems, and I refuse to stop believing that.”

“I’ve always admired your optimism. I remember how happy you and Noah were, peppering me with questions and brimming at the prospect of new friends. Yet, even if science reverses the gene mods, it can’t bring back the stolen years and history. It can’t reset everything to how it was before.”

“That’s a defeatist attitude; we can try, Tarva. Haysi—that’s a cattle rescue I’m friends with, for the other guests—she used to be a historian. When she heard that everything she loved was ripped to shreds by the Archives, you could see how much it hurt her. But, while she might not be willing to leave the safety of her room, she’s brave enough to work on a new exhibit of the Venlil’s past. We can move forward. We can get through this.”

President Cupo flared his beige trunk. “I don’t know how I ever

doubted humanity's motives. I was certain they'd turn on us, but Khoa owes our continued freedom to them. You have my full faith, and my full support for this mystical union of yours."

"The Gojids would like to hear more about what membership entails," Kiri chimed in. "The benefits and the costs. Protecting what's left…I think we share that goal with the Thafkis."

Halmina tossed her head. "We're curious about the economic benefits. If you can give us a leg up on those pesky Nevoks, we're in, no questions asked. It'd be worth your while—cheaper wares, better quality— to cut them out of the equation entirely. They've been losing to us in every regard for the past century."

"I'm not an official diplomat, but this is about genuine harmony and fair treatment between species. I can't see us agreeing to exclude any allies. If anything is discussed economically, I imagine it'll be market regulations and labor laws," Sara sighed.

"What a disappointment! We're a newer species, like you. We fought our way from the ground up, and we didn't do it through red tape."

I interjected, thinking of how to placate the money-hungry species. "If the Fissan Compact is superior to the Nevoks, it should be easy for you to negotiate deals with every power on your own. That's how the free market works, isn't it? Surely you have the confidence to outbid them. You don't want any ethical problems embroiling you in controversy along the way, or any confusion in currency exchanges. The regulations exist for your benefit."

"Hm…I suppose we'll consider the impact of these proposals. The Nevoks are so far behind us that they're nigh irrelevant. Our superior prices speak for themselves."

"The Venlil Republic would love to hear your best offers for an exclusivity deal, if you join. Now, please excuse me."

I ducked away from the circle, feeling confident that Sara could steer the conversation away from greedy lines. The Mazics didn't seem to require convincing to join our union, the Fissans would sign on if they thought they could get the better of the humans economically, and the Gojids would be interested in any protection for their piecemeal colonies. I passed Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen, in one-on-one discussion with UN Secretary of Alien Affairs

Erin Kuemper. From what I overheard, the predator was detailing protections for medics under the Geneva Conventions. The quadruped seemed receptive to these clauses.

The United Nations was adamant about having every member state ratify the Geneva Conventions, and a Universal Declaration of Sapient Rights, before permitting entry. Severe violations would be cause for immediate dismissal from the group.

There was no sign of Ambassador Noah, which gave me a slight pang of disappointment. I shook my head, certain that he'd turn up later; the astronaut was likely hiding among one of the groups. Secretary-General Zhao was with a massive group, telling an amusing story to his listeners. I realized this was the only time I'd seen him wear a visor; during our early briefings, he elected not to do so. I slipped into the crowd, and perked my ears to catch the end of his anecdote.

"…mind you, this was my first time visiting an alien planet. As I stated, we were briefed on avoiding sudden movements or emotional displays, to avoid panicking the Venlil. So Jones and I are trying to be business-like and professional, but we have no idea how to feel inside. General Kam thinks it's a wonderful idea to take us all the way to the governor mansion's gates, and there isn't a soul in sight," Zhao growled.

Yotul ambassador Laulo leaned forward. "Let me guess, they heard human military were visiting, and nobody dared to visit?"

"That's the gist of it. Anyhow, Kam seems nervous, and remarks on what competent predators we are. I've got no clue how to respond to that, so I take a swig of my water. Jones decides she's gonna make a wise-crack with the aliens, says something like, 'Oh, don't worry, the US only preys on oil fields.' I can't help but laugh, and the water shoots up out my nose, sprays all over Kam. The Venlil just looks *horrified*."

"I haven't heard this story," I commented.

"I think I find it more amusing than he does. Anyways, I apologize to Kam, and Jones and I are trying to explain why that happens. She means to search up the scientific reason for drinks coming up your nose, and asks where her holopad is. You know where it was? In her hands. You could just see in Kam's eyes when he realized that humans are horribly-designed, incompetent predators."

“I thought you were apex predators,” Governor Birla, the current Tilfish leader, offered in an uncertain voice.

“Sure, that’s true enough. We also trip over literally nothing, put our holopads in the fridge when grabbing food, and forget what we were saying in the middle of a sentence. I’m serious, do your species ever walk into rooms and you can’t remember what you went there for?”

The Thafki representative scrunched his blue-gray nose. “We zone out and forget things, of course…but why would it be tied to walking into rooms for humans?”

“Funny enough, I looked it up, and it might be one of our prey defects. Early humans lived in caves, so predators would typically lurk at the edge of those thresholds. One theory is that our brains tell us to focus up, and search for dangers…I guess our predator wiring isn’t that strong, is it? We had plenty of creatures that ate us in the wild. Hell, the reason we probably invented language was to raise alarm calls for specific predators.”

“You’re sapient because you used to be prey,” Duerten ambassador Coji remarked, in a voice that was unusually quiet.

Something found in the Archives changed her hostility. She seems mellow rather than incendiary…I should look up the exact contents of the Duerten’s files. I was so focused on our own, that I hardly cared about any other species’ truths.

Zhao nodded. “Precisely. Just look at us—and I don’t mean our eyes. We were defenseless prey, and most of our instincts evolved from us trying to stop being eaten all the time. The more I learn about it, from scrambling to understand our place in the galaxy, the more I think our instincts have little bearing on how we actually live nowadays. Humans have some obsolete, faulty wiring.”

“Terrans have so many shared traits with us.” I straightened my tail with confidence; the Secretary-General was taking the right approach to build common ground. “They’re nothing like predators are supposed to be.”

“Sapients are supposed to be whatever they want to be. Predator or prey—that is a dichotomy for animals. In this union, we’re all the same. It’s almost time for my speech, and that’s exactly what I’m going to argue. What’s best for all of us is to protect each other, and

to cultivate a new culture of acceptance and tolerance. I hope each of you will choose to join us."

Once the majority of the guests had arrived, the humans would be able to present their opening speech. Between the two circles I'd visited, the predators' diplomatic appeals were going surprisingly well. None of the species appeared disconcerted, and the fear directed toward Terrans seemed to have eased. I risked a glance around the venue, and spotted Noah and Glim on the opposite side of the hall. The Suleans, the Onkari, the Verin, and a number of more recent neutrals were picking through the food offerings, alongside the Venlil-human duo; everyone there was in good spirits.

As light-hearted as this summit had been so far, I couldn't shake my unease over how well it started off. Gatherings never went smoothly for humanity, between the Aafa speech at gunpoint, the ship sabotage, and the bombing of Earth's memorial on Venlil Prime. It was too early to relax my guard; my job was to ensure there were no incidents with any of the delegations. The reception to the predators' initial address should be telling, giving us an estimate of how many species had genuine interest in signing an accord.

Chapter 134

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: February 5, 2137

Secretary-General Zhao had clambered up onto the stage, wielding a microphone to address the sprawling crowd. I perked my ears up to hear what initial rallying cry the humans had crafted; from what I'd heard, their species possessed excellent speechwriters, with the ability to weave compelling arguments and play to semantics. The UN leader was holding a few notecards, and had a presentation behind him on the projector. Noah walked up to me with a plate full of food, waving a croissant in front of my face. Why did he have to remember my favorite Terran pastry?

"You want to distract me, don't you, *predator*?" I teased.

The human smirked to himself. "It's working, isn't it? Here comes the airplane!"

"I'll send you to the opposite side of the room if you don't behave… and stop trying to fatten my waistline."

Ambassador Williams made a pouting face, lifting his visor to reveal what humans called "puppy dog" eyes. To think that binocular gazes could be changed into an expression garnering sympathy. I shook my head, before breaking off a small piece of the croissant and popping it in my mouth. The astronaut looked satisfied with himself, and delved into the rest of his excessive amount of food. Perhaps I needed to babysit him, before he gorged himself sick.

Ugh, humans.

I managed to center my attention on the stage, as the Secretary-General commenced his speech. Every delegation in the room was granting the human their full focus; the group he'd been mingling with before seemed especially keen on his words, after the disarming sampler that was dispensed among them. Marketing the prey attributes of Terrans was a brilliant move. Had I known what utter dorks they were during our first meeting, the perceived schism between our ancestries wouldn't have felt as irreconcilable.

"Hello, leaders of the Orion Arm. I'm not here to present the

reasons why humanity is not a menace or a threat to civilization, or to deflect claims that we're bloodthirsty monsters," Zhao growled. "Each of you have interacted with us at length, and if you don't already see that as the infallible truth, there's little I could say to convince you otherwise. We're people, like you, who have been persecuted without just cause…precisely like you. We're no one's enemy, lest you threaten the safety of our loved ones, our homes, and our continued way of life."

I leaned closer to Noah's ear. "The last line seems a little provocative. They could take 'threatening your way of life' as opposing hunting, for instance, or asking you not to eat meat on their worlds."

"Absurd. Anyone who draws wild conclusions like that wouldn't last a day in this alliance," my beloved replied.

The Secretary-General adjusted his visor, before continuing. "Humans respect the inherent differences in our cultures, despite their artificial origin; we don't ask you to change yourselves. We merely ask for the same courtesy. We ask—no, we *demand* not to be changed or altered, for things beyond our control or ingrained over centuries of *natural* development in our collective identities. The laws we wish to codify as a foundation for this proposed union etch that fervent belief into stone. Please, raise an appendage if you feel that your species was treated unfairly during your 'uplift' by the Federation."

My paw rocketed into the air, joined by dozens of others in my expansive vision. Scanning the entirety of the crowd in a subtle motion, I noticed there wasn't a single attendee refraining from lifting their arm in agreement. The Krakotl and the Duerten both had wings raised, while Mazic President Cupo flared his trunk to the heavens in protest of early size-based bigotry. The Yotul ambassador was practically bouncing to show emphasis; the tiny, quadruped Zurulians rocked up onto their hindlegs to signal agreement. My own people bore indignant looks, mirroring my raised paw. It was a sea of consensus, detesting the personal effects of the Federation's overreach.

"I'm glad that you recognize what's been done to you was immoral. We're going to ensure that such horrors are never inflicted by anyone who calls themselves a friend of humanity." Zhao gestured

for us to lower our appendages. “That anyone who dares to trample another civilization’s sanctity and sovereignty is given no quarter, no aid, no *herd* with us. Our first item to show you is based upon a document adopted by every member of the United Nations, now modified to reflect ‘sapient rights,’ rather than solely ‘human rights.’ I present the *Universal Declaration of Sapient Rights*.”

The display behind Zhao offered a code to scan relevant documents to our holopads, so we could peruse its contents in our own language. Article 1 stated that all sapient beings were born free and equal in dignity and rights, and were endowed with reason and conscience to act in a spirit of kinship. Subsequent listings expounded upon those rights, prohibiting discrimination, banishing torture and servitude, and guaranteeing civil rights about personal beliefs and enforcement of laws.

There’s nothing I could imagine anyone finding objectionable. I noticed the Terrans snuck diet in between language and religion as things not to deny rights over; knowing how human culture is, I imagine that’s a new protection added for their sake.

“The United Nations is open to suggested revisions, for anything you think we’ve overlooked, that’s heavy-handed, or that would otherwise provide you reassurance. For our own sake, we’ve also issued the Geneva Conventions for your ratification,” the Secretary-General pressed on. “Should there ever be an engagement or dispute between member states, I want civilians to be kept out of the crossfire. I want some semblance of civility in an affair as brutal, bloody, and barbaric as war, though my true hope is that we maintain peace through this very forum. It would provide humanity sanctity of mind not to worry about wanton suffering, so I ask that you review this document as well.”

Noah mumbled a comment to me through a mouthful of food. “I should think our doubters like a promise from the *predators* to accept surrenders and treat prisoners fairly, among other things. Also, it shows our intent never to raid worlds and target civilians like the Arxur do.”

“Rules of war are a strange concept to us. That there can be any goodness or empathy, when you’re trying to kill people…it’s hard to wrap even my mind around,” I whispered. “I’d never imagine Venlil fighting you anyways, so it’s a moot point.”

“The final point is perhaps our most important one; it’s something entirely new we wrote.” The Secretary-General’s lips, uncovered by any mask, hardened below his eye visor. “To touch upon your discontent over your own uplifts, this document contains a protocol for handling the discovery of any new species. I felt this was an issue we must take with the utmost gravitas. Please consult the final item in your packet for full details.”

I flicked through my holopad’s catalog, landing on the discussed draft. Doing better than taking every child on a planet away from their parents, and crippling them at a genetic level, seemed like a low bar to clear. It would be curious to see the specific items the Terrans had in mind. Hopefully, the other guests also agreed that young races should be treated with dignity…and in the spirit of equality.

Zhao commanded the stage. “Panels must convene to ensure that any first contact, one, does not threaten the indigenous culture or supplant it with our own. Two, that barring an emergency event, it must be planned at length to avoid frightening the locals, through careful study of cultural norms and values. Three, that we will not engage in any communications, visits, or exchanges that are not expressly desired by the natives. And four, that they will not face discrimination for their technological level. Any questions?”

“So you still want to perform ‘uplifts’, after everything you’ve seen?” Yotul ambassador Laulo barked, ears quivering with anger. “Why are we interfering with a species’ natural development at all?”

“Excellent question. I grant that this is a contentious ethical issue, even on our world. However, to sit back with an air of moral superiority, and allow millions to die of diseases and famine, is to deem these species as lesser—to say we don’t care about their lives. Obviously, dumping an entire catalog of knowledge at once is irresponsible; it should be drip-fed, and focused on issues that impact quality of life. Uplifting itself is not evil, as long you’re not planting your heel in their neck.”

“I see. I’m still not sure it’s a good idea, but proceed I suppose.“

“I appreciate your feedback. Any ramifications of our group’s interactions with another culture, at any stage of technology, deserve consideration. The influence we have must be wielded for

good. I imagine a first contact would be planned for years. Would anyone else like to voice a question or concern?"

Duerten ambassador Coji puffed out her gray feathers in a display of dominance. "You claim to care about herbivores, yet you ally and cooperate with the Arxur."

"Our intentions with the Arxur are entirely as follows: to use them to strengthen our position in the war, to liberate all sapient cattle in the galaxy, and to dismantle the Dominion where possible. This was seen at Mileau, as you all have heard, where we got a UN-friendly Arxur commander to soften the Kolshians up for us. That battle has been difficult nonetheless, but it's given us a competitive advantage. And you all have seen the millions of rescues we've freed, in a few months."

"So you admit you're working with the Arxur."

"I admit we're using the Arxur to benefit humanity and sapients across the galaxy. That accusation has dogged us from the beginning, yet no one can conjure an example of us siding with or acting like them. We went to great lengths to stop the raids on the cradle, Fahl, and Sillis, losing human lives in the process."

"You claim, human, that they're not your friends. We're supposed to believe that predators would choose prey over a fellow predator—a fellow predator that conveniently saved Earth."

"You should believe us. Do you see the Arxur invited to this meeting today? We sought to secure our alliance with all of you here today, not them. While some bargains we've made are unsavory, even causing us discomfort, don't fault us for doing whatever we must to win this war. I want everyone here to survive and remain free."

While Arxur in-fighting was known throughout the galaxy, I was the sole leader in this room aware of Isif's empathy test; it wasn't something that the Chief Hunter cared to advertise, so he wouldn't have appreciated me publicizing it. Our shared goals for a better future were the reason I cooperated with him. Had other parties known the extent of our interactions, they might vote to hurl me out the nearest airlock.

"I understand your point, though even talking to them is most unsettling." Coji still eyed the predator with disdain, but submitted

to his confident words. “I think I speak for everyone in this room, in saying we’d never work with a filthy gray. We’ll be watching this.”

Secretary-General Zhao nodded. “Very well. Is that the only concern in the room?”

“You have the Farsul imprisoned on their own world, isn’t that right?” Krakotl separatist Nuela squawked.

“Yes. It was an option that took the Farsul out of play, and allows us to decide what to do with them after the war ends. We can’t afford to occupy them, or to do nothing and let them rejoin the war. Besides, there must be consequences. They’ve perpetrated too much evil as a civilization.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. Why did you let them live? Clear the debris, and bomb them! The Farsul deserve to die for what they’ve done.”

Calls of assent rippled across the room; if I wasn’t afraid of upsetting peace-loving Noah, I might’ve signaled my own desire for righteous vengeance. These were people who couldn’t abide by any civilization not being under their control, and who ripped children away from their mothers on Skalga. Why did the Farsul deserve a future, after reshaping every species and allowing other worlds, like the Thafki’s, to fall? Had the predators decided to eradicate them, I might’ve felt a dark glimmer of satisfaction.

“Well, I say we save the serious, lengthy discussions for tomorrow, when the Paltans…presumably show. I’ll leave you with a final thought: my proposed name for this venture is the Sapient Coalition. Mull that over, and without further ado, let’s get the festivities started!”

A cheer went up from the more human-friendly guests, as the predators switched the music to a more lively overture. Drinks rolled in on carts, which earned that rapturous reaction from the visitors who were less-than-fond of the binocular-eyed sapients. Coji, Krakotl separatist Nuela, and Gojid Minister Kiri beelined it for the liquor, while other guests approached at a normal pace. Glim was also scurrying toward the stronger booze, though trying not to attract attention. I wondered if it was a good idea for the rescue to be drinking.

I brushed up against Noah, feigning a look of innocence. “Do you

think you can beat me in a drinking contest, dear?"

"You're evil." He placed his hands on his hips, and stifled a laugh. "I'm kind of a lightweight, so I don't think so. I never understood what's so bad about that anyways; I get the same effect out of less booze. Isn't that a win?"

"Well, humans are all lightweights to me, so I won't judge you any more than the rest of your kind. Come on, let's browse the fun juice! This is a happy occasion, for once."

Lowering the inhibitions of a predator would've once come across as a suicidal idea, but I trusted that Noah had no latent bloodlust at this point. We retrieved a handful of drinks, getting into the social mood; the Terran ambassador downed a few shots of vodka, perhaps because of me. It seemed unusual to bring out a bar at a diplomatic summit, but I suspected it was to stifle guests' fearful inhibitions. With a leader's hackles down, they might warm up to humans, or even enjoy themselves.

We wandered the floor, avoiding dancing or sitting at a table for the moment. Secretary-General Zhao was showcasing a number of games from Earth, a few of which were children's games. Noah volunteered to demonstrate one called "Pin the Tail on the Donkey", and tried to rally the crowd as he swaggered forward. Secondhand embarrassment made my skin feel hot, watching him struggle to remove his visor. The UN leader shook his head, before procuring a cloth strip and wrapping it over the ambassador's eyes.

Sara waltzed in by my side. "The Paltan delegation has arrived, Tarva. They had the longest voyage of anyone here, but that accounts for everyone on the guest list."

"Excellent. Stick around for a moment. Noah has been drinking and is blindfolded—I'm sure you want to see this."

The human ambassador was handed a "tail" to stick on an animal picture; it was apparent from his head posture that he couldn't see anything. Zhao placed his hands on Noah's shoulders, spinning him around ten times. The astronaut staggered forward, lurching from side-to-side, and extended a searching arm in front of him. The crowd was uncertain how to react to a sightless, disoriented predator, but the braver spectators cheered him on.

My quiet snickering turned to horror, as Noah stumbled right before

the donkey picture. His face smacked against the wall, and the mock tail fell from his grip. I rushed to his side before I could think, cradling the groaning predator's skull in my paws. The astronaut pushed the blindfold off his eyes, and offered a reassuring smile. Crimson blood was dripping from his nose, sending a jolt of pain through my heart; this put a damper in an otherwise jovial moment.

"All the security Zhao has here, and nobody's arresting the 2D donkey? It clearly assaulted me!" Noah quipped.

I chuckled at his goofiness. "Do I have to cut you off already? Let's get you cleaned up."

"I'm fine, Tarva. I was just demonstrating what not to do for the people who've never played."

How does anyone think humans are dangerous?

I helped Noah up, checking him for any other injuries. "Don't try to act all tough! I'll find a first aid kit, and—"

My chastising of Ambassador Williams faltered, as I noticed the complexion drain from Zhao's cheeks. The Secretary-General had a hand to his earpiece, and didn't seem to like some news he was receiving. The UN leader quietly muttered for everyone to stay put, before striding out of the room. I shared a glance with Noah and Sara; an unspoken understanding was reached between us. The three of us tailed the Chinese national, followed shortly after by the majority of the delegates.

This feels like what happened at Earth's memorial ceremony all over again. I have to know what has him shaken up, and find a way to keep Noah safe.

"What is going on?" I screeched.

Zhao didn't even look back. "Stay where you are, Tarva. There's an unknown ship that followed the Paltans from the handoff site, without being seen."

"What? Is it the Kolshians?" Noah's injury was forgotten, and he quickened his pace to catch the Secretary-General. "All of the delegates are in one place. Most of our key personnel are here. I thought this location was secure!"

"I don't know who it is, but I know it's not a shadow fleet ship. More on that in a moment. Our audio recognition tells us it was a

Dossur voice transmitting a message to us, requesting permission to land. The Dossur delegation is already here, Ambassador, and the shuttle itself is a Krakotl ship that went missing years ago. We jammed its weapons systems, forced it to land in a sealed bay, and ordered the passengers to disembark. There's only two life signatures."

"But you let unscheduled visitors land?" I hissed.

"And I'm sorry, how did they avoid sensor detection?" Sara's tone was thick with worry. "Who would know where the handoff was to follow them in the first place?"

"I'm trying to get answers. We need to see what's going on, and how they found us! They refused to say who they were over the channel. The ship's in a sealed hangar, and an entire team of soldiers will be waiting for them; the station's integrity is safe. We're going to sweep the craft for bombs, though scanners turned up no suspicious markers. That's why I asked everyone to stay where they were, instead of following me."

Duerten ambassador Coji squawked with suspicion. "You said yourself that it was a Dossur speaking, not a Kolshian make, that its weapons are offline, that your people vastly outnumber the passengers, and that a scan showed no signs of threats. What are you hiding, that you don't want us to see?"

"I'm protecting you. After *the incident* on Venlil Prime, I've been taking every precaution to ensure you're safe on this station. But if you insist, tag along, by all means!"

"We will. There's no predator deception happening on my watch."

Secretary-General Zhao tightened his fists, storming into the bay. Dozens of guests tailed behind us, determined to see what the commotion was about. True to the UN leader's word, predator soldiers were encircling a small Federation shuttle; massive guns were pointed at the landing ramp, in case of trouble. I fitted my paw into Noah's hand, and he squeezed it to reassure me. Military personnel delivered the order for the passengers to disembark, upon Zhao's signal.

The tension was tangible in the air, descending on the gathering with suffocating effects. The landing ramp lowered, and I craned my neck to spot the ship's occupants. It was disturbing that an

unknown party could track us to a secret location; there was the possibility that they were a scout ship for an actual threat. We needed to assess their allegiance, and question them at length. The Terrans held remarkable trigger discipline, so I trusted the soldiers not to get itchy fingers.

A massive shadow moved inside the ship, and the muscles in my legs stiffened with horror. Noah's uncovered eyes went wide with shock, making the veins pop next to his brown irises. The Terran soldiers grew much more aggressive with their shouts, now ordering the passenger to stay where they were. Gasps and screams rippled through the Federation crowd, who shuffled backward. If someone didn't reassure them, this could turn into a stampede.

The figure cloaked in darkness was unmistakably an Arxur silhouette.

I thought about Zhao's response to Duerten accusations, shooting down the notion of working with the grays. Had the humans invited them here? Either way, the galaxy's other predators had infiltrated our secret meeting, and that didn't bode well for the Sapient Coalition's diplomatic prospects.

Chapter 135

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: February 5, 2137

Secretary-General Zhao leapt into action, declaring that human security had the situation under control. My fur bristled from fear, before I noticed that the Terran leader seemed more concerned about our guests' reactions than the Arxur intrusion. A carnivorous predator remained on the landing ramp, and I swore I spotted a Dossur using its forehead as a seat. The beast's maw hung open, leaving me to spot a signature chipped tooth.

Isif. What is he doing here?

"This was *not* a planned visit!" Zhao barked. "I guarantee my men can keep you safe. I also swear to give a full explanation and accounting for our security lapse; we have nothing to hide from anyone. Please, I ask a few minutes to sort this out."

Ambassador Coji was flapping her wings with irritation. "I knew you were partnering with the Arxur, and deceiving us!"

"They were not invited. You can interrogate me to your heart's content, but I ask you to merely allow me to present the facts and ensure your safety. This is the UN-friendly commander I mentioned earlier that went to Mileau; I spelled out the truth in exact detail. You each came all the way here, so please, give me a proper chance to detail the facts. Now, excuse me one second."

I was the only one who dared to creep forward, getting myself into eavesdropping range as Zhao approached Isif. Other diplomats seemed terrified for the Secretary-General approaching a carnivore, whereas Coji and the Duerten Shield representatives looked as though they'd finally caught humans in the act of conspiring against prey. The Dossur perched on the gray's head was the object of my curiosity. Who was she, and why was she so serene in the presence of a sharp-fanged predator?

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Zhao hissed, echoing my concerns. "Are you trying to cripple the United Nations' reputation? Also, if Betterment gets wind of you showing up here, we could be dragged into hostilities we can't afford."

The Dossur glowered at the human, speaking in Isif's stead. "We'd like to work together as allies, so your people need to stand against Betterment, not just the Kolshians. If we want peace, it's time for the Arxur to make amends. We want to talk to the delegates, and explain how the rebellion opposes the Dominion."

"Is that so? You're out of your mind if you think these herbivores will even *listen* to the idea of working with you, Isif."

"I do not think that it will work, but I have been persuaded to try," Isif growled. "I am not so foolish as to think I could join your union. Would it be so wrong for me to say a few words, and open some channels? I cannot fight the Dominion alone, and I do not wish for this war to persist between us and the leaf-lickers."

"It's going to be a nightmare to clean up this mess, *without* allowing you to speak. Getting them to join up with us was going to require nothing short of diplomatic perfection. Now, they're watching me chat with an Arxur; if I don't get rid of you soon, guests will start walking out of the summit!"

"Please, Secretary-General Zhao. They have already seen me, yes? I wish to say a few words…as Noah did on Aafa. It cannot make things worse."

The human leader stood seething for several seconds, and locked eyes with me. I hesitated, before signaling my approval with my prosthetic tail. Zhao shook his head at the ground, failing to conceal that he was visibly upset. The United Nations had put a lot of stock into this summit, and now, it would be spent justifying why Earth was colluding with the Arxur. After taking a moment to collect himself, the primate turned to address the diplomats.

"I don't believe I'm even passing this on to you, but the Arxur wishes to say a few words. I can attest that we'd make sure he doesn't set a foot wrong. We will not let him stay at the summit long, but you may wish to hear what he intended to say…perhaps, if only, to pass judgment on us. I wish to give you all the facts and all the angles," Zhao said.

Gojid Minister Kiri looked outraged. "Isn't that the monster that destroyed the cradle?"

"The one who kept us as food?" Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen chimed in.

Nuela, the Krakotl separatist, squawked with fury. “You should gun that mass murderer down on the spot!”

Isif stared at the floor, as the crowd moved from a fearful state, to jeers and calls for execution. It was obvious that Zhao was unwilling to shoot Isif, even if it would calm the mob; however, any attempts by the humans to defend the Arxur were going to collapse the summit. I’d told that gray outright, after his empathy test, that I could never forgive him. That hadn’t changed, and collaboration between his faction and the Venlil would stay pragmatic rather than friendly. However, the only way to save this gathering was for me to speak up in the Terrans’ stead.

“Silence!” I shrieked, swishing my prosthetic tail with raw emotion. “Venlil were the ones who were the delicacies of his sector, and who were tormented by unspeakable cruelty. I lost my pride and joy, at the age of six, to Isif, but I say you should hear Zhao’s explanation. The dying wish of Elias Meier was for peace between us and the Arxur; it’s my wish now too.

President Cupo stamped a massive paw. “Why, Tarva?”

“I want the grays to stop attacking us! I want the Dominion and the Federation gone! Most importantly, I want the truth to mean something for once in this stardamned galaxy. There is *nothing* I won’t sacrifice for that.”

Secretary-General Zhao clasped his hands behind his back, strolling forward. “Well said, Tarva. Humanity is willing to give everything of ourselves for peace. Look at Ambassador Williams, who went to Aafa despite expecting to be killed, or worse. Why did you volunteer, Noah?”

“I said that if there was a single species like the Venlil, it was worth it,” Noah answered without skipping a beat. “I would’ve died for what we’re doing here today. I would’ve gone to my grave, satisfied, for a chance to *maybe* acquire peace.”

“The United Nations shuts no doors to anyone willing to mend the rift in this galaxy. Before we decide whether to permit Isif’s request to parlay, I ask you to lend your ears for five minutes. Follow me back to the banquet hall, while we contain our visitor here, and you will hear the full scope of humanity’s dealings with the Arxur.”

The Terrans leader pushed his way through the crowd, who parted

in a hurry to avoid the confident predator. I cast a scathing look at my fellow diplomats, and hurried after Secretary-General Zhao. If anyone could talk their way out of this disaster, it was the humans; their silver tongues were the only reason a predator race swayed any allies to their side at all. I would do anything in my power to back up Earth's claims.

The first order of business was ensuring that the diplomats would listen to us at all. The Zurulians, the Yotul, and surprisingly, the Krakotl were the first factions to return to the meeting area. Mazic President Cupo, despite his former skepticism of everything the primates did, was coaxing others to agree to the impromptu plan. The Sulean and Iftali representatives herded former neutrals back, while the Dossur delegation managed to stop gawking at Isif's confidently-waving hat.

The most-staunch human allieswon't turn on the arboreal predators, not without hearing their side of the story. It's the others that will mean the difference between a Sapient Coalition of a dozen or so, one of forty-plus, or somewhere in between.

The rest of the factions trickled in, grudgingly willing to hear the Earthlings' explanation. The Gojid and Tilfish leaders seemed disgusted; the cradle and Sillis both had suffered devastating Arxur raids in the post-human era. The Thafki looked terrified, which was understandable for a species that was nearly hunted to extinction. Recent revelations showed that the Federation conspiracy allowed their planet to fall centuries ago, making that loss even more needless. Meanwhile, Duerten Shield visitors appeared to be returning to solicit a confession from Zhao.

"You just proved you'll choose the Arxur over us." Coji stormed toward the stage, ruffled with disgust. "Here's the proof of you siding with them. Humans acting like them comes next. You lied about the extent of your involvement with them!"

Zhao leaned toward the podium's microphone. "Settle down! My answer to you was the truth; I can recite it to you, since I have it written on these cards here. Does anyone recall the three things I listed as our intentions with the Arxur?"

"To win the war?" Zurulian ambassador Chauson offered.

"Close enough. I did say we'll do whatever we must to achieve victory. So I repeat, my three stated intentions were: to use them to

strengthen our position in the war, to liberate all sapient cattle in the galaxy, and to dismantle the Dominion where possible. Those are my exact words, and it was the truth. We interact with Isif to benefit humanity and sapient life as a whole."

Coji puffed out her feathers. "But you didn't say—"

"That's exactly what I said, verbatim. These proceedings are recorded; you can check for yourself. Nothing I said was a lie, or predator deceit. I was quite candid about us allying with them, even naming the specific instance of Mileau. Do you refute that claim?"

"No. *But* I refute that a gray could ever benefit humanity or any of us!"

"Really? So Isif lending thousands of ships to fend off Kolshians at Mileau meant nothing? He is leading a rebellion against the Dominion, which you and I both thoroughly despise. That weakens the Arxur. The battle of Sillis ended bloodlessly because he intervened. Furthermore, since his uprising began, he's attacked cattle holdings and returned any herbivores he could acquire."

"So you don't care about the cradle at all?" Minister Kiri hissed.

"Are you forgetting who fought the Arxur on the ground? There would be no Gojid refugees without humanity. The fact that your remaining colonies have been left alone is because we retook the cradle *and* parlayed with Isif. Again, I'll do anything to ensure your survival as sovereign entities."

The Gojid representative backed down, but judging by the bristling spines, she was still simmering. Having bargained for every Venlil cattle in custody, I could attest to the benefits of negotiating with Isif. Planting meat-growing factories on Skalga had been unsavory; still, the exchange was a net positive for my species. Humanity and its allies needed every drop of cooperation they could scrounge up. General Jones had briefed me on the Arxur-Kolshian collusion to perpetrate the war, after assuring that I would keep it secret.

It's a good reason to seek peace…and it redirects some of the blame, knowing the conspiracy wanted us to be attacked and butchered.

"Tell them why the Arxur still exist at all," I prompted.

Zhao pursed his lips. "I was going to show them tomorrow, but very well—it can be bumped up the list. The Kolshians could've stopped the Arxur at any time. It wasn't just the Thafki's world they let be

raided. It was every world that was ever attacked by an Arxur ship. If you don't believe me, hear it from Nikonus' lips."

The Secretary-General hastily played the video clip intercepted from private communications, when Chief Nikonus had called Prophet-Descendant Giznel over Arxur interference in the Battle of Mileau. Gasps sounded across the hall, seeing the two rival powers conversing with each other. Diplomats' shocked expressions intensified, as they processed what the two heads of state were saying. Betterment's leader griped that Isif was promoting "peace and satiety" with his rebellion. Nikonus' reply was somehow more damning.

We need one predator around, and the last thing I want is a fucking Arxur asking for peace! It makes you look good. The Kolshian had spat the words with disgust.

I know; it's sickening. A fat, lazy Dominion without Betterment? The war must continue, for the sake of control. We're trying to hunt Isif down, but he's been elusive, Giznel responded.

The tape finished playing, culminating in Nikonus' assurances that Betterment could continue their raids. The diplomats seemed appalled, hearing the Kolshians endorse the Arxur's barbaric cattle practices. Despite this knowledge not being new to me, it was an infuriating reminder of how the conspiracy wanted Venlil to be weak and afraid. My daughter's death was part of their "moral imperative to fix the galaxy." *What a joke*.

"Isif seeking peace was a threat to our enemies. That's why humanity works with him." Zhao planted both hands on the podium, and I could sense his binocular eyes surveying the audience. "Whatever the Farsul, the Kolshians, and the Dominion don't want, we do. They don't care how many lives are lost. They want to keep us all in this terrible loop, so that they retain their power."

"Nothing changes the fact that those grays are people-eating monsters!" the Thafki ambassador objected. "It doesn't change everything Isif has done."

"You're right. But the Arxur weren't always like this. Just like all of you weren't always what they made you to be. If Isif's movement keeps Nikonus *and* Giznel up at night, that's a damn good reason to keep it going. How do you think the Kolshians will feel, just seeing

a peace-seeking carnivore address you?"

I imagined Chief Nikonus would have a conniption, if we allowed Isif to present a statement to the delegation. My fantasy of the look on his face made me giggle under my breath, earning a strange look from Noah. Learning the atrocities inflicted on Skalga's inhabitants by the conspiracy had turned me spiteful. The Federation's founders deserved to pay for their crimes, and have the crumbling of their ideology shoved in their faces.

The unanimous opposition to Isif's presence has dried up in a hurry. Sentiments seem more mixed now, though people like Coji and the Thafki aren't mollified.

"I express my utmost gratitude for each of you listening to humanity's side of the story. Your consideration is all that I asked. Let's take a vote; who would permit the Arxur to speak his piece?" Zhao asked.

To my surprise, Nuela's wing shot up before my own paw raised. The Krakotl must truly detest the Kolshians, for what they did to Nishtal all those years ago. The Fissans seemed to weigh whether Isif's speech could have economic benefits; however, when the Nevok ambassador raised a paw, the Fissans matched their rival's vote. Gojid Minister Kiri surveyed the current tally, before hesitantly throwing her paw into the air. Among other assenting voters were Tilfish Governor Birla, the Zurulian and Yotul camps, the tardy Paltan party, the quiet Takkans, and the Sulean-Iftali delegates.

There were some predictable parties among the naysayers: the Thafki, for obvious reasons, and anyone affiliated with the predator-hating Duerten Shield. Mazic President Cupo was the most surprising voter against the humans' plea. Khoa's leader pledged full-throated support to the Terrans, but he rejected the idea of hearing from an actual monster. There was only so far he was willing to compromise his values.

The split was visible through a survey of the audience, with there being a clear edge to those in favor of hearing Isif's speech. I released a breath I didn't know I'd been holding in. Per my quick estimate, about two-thirds of the audience cast a "yes" vote to Zhao's query. The Secretary-General blinked with pleasant surprise, before announcing that he would fetch Isif. Those who'd voted

against this proposition looked extremely discontented; Coji was staring at her peers with a betrayed expression.

“Fuck you, predators!” The Duerten stormed up to Ambassador Noah, who was nursing his bleeding nose. “*You!* You say you want peace, you want rights, then you bring the very monsters that steal both of those things here under false pretenses. How many aliens have you gotten killed, dragging them into your war?”

The Terran astronaut flinched, and I could tell that Coji struck a nerve with the war casualties remark. It was clear he was also frightened that the avian would attack him and make a scene. I moved in front of my human, resisting his attempts to pull me back. My paw curled into a fist, as I leveled the Duerten ambassador with a glare that could melt glaciers. The rest of the Venlil delegation, minus Glim, rushed to my side, forming a wall in front of Noah.

“I think you should leave,” I told Coji coldly.

Other human-friendly species mobilized into our formation, the unintimidating Zurulians among the first to stand by my side. Nuela was ready to go toe-to-toe with the other avian species, with the Krakotl delegates eager to atone for their past crimes. The Duerten ambassador became visibly nervous when Cupo stepped into her path; the Mazic respected the results of the vote, and didn’t appreciate the scathing rhetoric toward sweet Noah. I recognized the irony, remembering how accusatory Khoa’s president had once been toward humans.

The gray-feathered avian turned her beak up toward the sky. “We’re leaving. The entirety of the Duerten Shield is leaving. We’ll never be beholden to filth like you…and your pets!”

Coji stalked away, followed by the handful of species from the Duerten’s alliance. Laulo, the Yotul ambassador, started cheering and imitating human clapping as she left. The avian looked like she wanted to bite his head off, though she marched off without another word. Secretary-General Zhao peeked his head back into the room, just in time for the Duerten to push past him. Judging by his weary grimace, the Chinese general put two and two together.

The good news was that the Thafki, and other non-Shield dissenters, remained present. With the troublesome Duerten vacating the premises, it would lessen the chances of hostile responses to every word a predator uttered. The 38 species still present found seats far

away from the stage, and waited for Isif to be brought in for his speech. Whatever the Chief Hunter wished to say to us, I hoped it wouldn't cause any more diplomatic upheaval.

Chapter 136

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Civilian*

Date [standardized human time]: February 5, 2137

The awkwardness between Marcel and I hung in the air, though the human forced some small talk. My exchange partner had stayed on the quarantine station for longer than any other patient, even after the infected were all cleared to leave. I didn't pry into his affairs, but the mention of moving to Venlil Prime hadn't sat well with his fiancé, Lucy. She was growing exhausted of the redhead running around the galaxy, and was less-than-thrilled at the prospect of leaving Earth behind. The Zurulian doctors had passed along rumors that they heard Marc yelling into his holopad.

The scarred predator had reported my crime to the United Nations, and admitted it when I came to speak with him after reading Frankenstein. Marcel thought he was doing me a favor, by qualifying his report with me being mentally ill and with unknown variables from the Venlil news in the Archives. The fact that my species were once fierce warriors unsettled me; we were twisted into something that I didn't comprehend. The instinct suppression program had stirred something that changed me back. Feeling like a science experiment gone wrong, the moral of *Frankenstein* landed.

I am the monster. A deformed, angry man…and I know what I must do.

I interrupted the human's current train of conversation, which was regarding rainforests on Earth. "You can't even look at me."

"What do you want me to say, Slanek? I'm, well, upset at my own people as much as you," Marcel growled. "When I notified UN command, they claimed that the video logs from your helmet cam, ah, went missing. Then, they pull some under the table stuff with the Venlil military to give you a quiet, honorable discharge. It's bullshit."

"I didn't want a discharge. I want to go back to the war."

"No! You told me you read the book, and you understood."

"I did, I finished it weeks ago. You're still not ready to talk."

"Slanek, who was the one dodging every question of substance? I don't need to hear any more lies from you. You just want me to let

it go, but we can't rewind the clock on our friendship. I trust very deeply, and you broke that. The *only* reason I'm coming with you is because I want you to get help. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner."

I rose to my feet, as the near-vacant train stopped near my hometown. "You think I damned myself. I heard your interpretation of the book. What's the point if I've already fucked everything over?"

His hazel eyes glistened. "I couldn't bear to watch you go off the deep end. I loved you, the brother I never had, Slanek. I still do. But this hatred is festering inside of you, and it's turning you into someone I don't recognize."

"Everything I did, I did because I cared about you. Because I didn't want you, or anyone like you, to get hurt! No matter what you think of me, I'm still here when you need me. I'll make sure you're taken care of on Venlil Prime."

The predator's stare intensified, and he placed his hands on my shoulders. Marcel turned me around forcibly, inspecting me with a look that screamed alarm. As bitter as I sounded right now, it offered slight comfort to know that the human still cared about me. The way I regarded him was like the brother I lost; perhaps my dependency on him was from fear of loss. The prospects of the Terran having no choice but to cling to me, due to the effects of the disease, *were* enticing. This was an alien world that he'd need to be coaxed into!

Unfortunately, my calling is much more urgent; the things that were done to me, to all Venlilkind, must be reckoned for. I'll try to set Marcel up for success.

"How you said that…it was like you're not coming back. Are you going to hurt yourself?" His voice had become much softer, and he shook his head emphatically. "It doesn't have to end like this. You made a mistake, I won't sugarcoat, but it doesn't have to define you forever. I'll help you."

I straightened my ears in earnest. "I'm not going to self-harm—that was a dark assumption. I just need to go somewhere else to sort out my issues."

"Of course, that's exactly what you should do! I'm, um, really happy

to hear that."

"See? I did understand. I'm a monster, and I need to do something about the things that made me one."

The Kolshians. The Farsul. The history being burned from the ledger.

"I wouldn't put it like that, but yeah!" Marcel declared, with a bit too much enthusiasm. "It takes a brave person to seek help. You got this, buddy."

Breaking away from the human, I led him down the sidewalk toward my childhood home; the cerulean rowhouse with crumbling paint had "character" and "eccentricity", as my mother put it. The last thing I wanted was to speak to my parents, knowing that they would be ashamed of the predatory creature their child had become. However, Marcel needed a place to stay, and I couldn't take care of my business until I knew he'd be looked after. My plea to the universe was that my folks weren't anti-Terran bigots.

Swallowing my hesitation, I ordered Marcel to wait at the bottom of the stairs. During my deployment on Sillis, that had been when I recognized the onset of what any normal Venlil would call predator disease. Onso cautioned me never to repeat that phrase again, but it would be tough to hide how much I changed. The Yotul had been correct about us being "fired up" before the Federation got us. Steeling my swirling nerves, my claws tapped the buzzer. As seconds passed waiting, flight impulses tugged at my mind for the first time in a while.

The door creaked open, before the elderly female Venlil behind it spotted us. Her transition to throw her arms around me was near instantaneous; I stood in numb silence as my mother sobbed into my shoulder. She stepped back at last, cupping my chin with pure joy. The guilt threatened to consume me, especially as a hint of fury tugged at her ears. I noticed her pupils dart briefly to Marcel, though she ignored him.

"Slanek! You haven't contacted us in months," she hissed. "We had no way of knowing if you were dead, and we saw you on the news with…*him*. The government told us you moved to *Earth,* during the raid, then we only found out you were alive by hearing you shipped off to Sillis."

I flicked my ears. "I'm sorry. There's some things I didn't want you

to know."

"Do you have any idea what you put us through, by deciding what we should know? Come here, human."

Marcel shifted on his feet. "Are you sure, Miss…shit, you guys don't have last names. I don't want to call you 'Miss Slanek.'"

"Call me Jensi. I obviously know who you are, Marcel Fraser. Thank you for bringing my son home."

"Sure thing. It was harrowing out there, Jensi. We've been through a lot together."

"But we don't need to talk about that," I interjected. "You're…more calm around Marcel than I expected."

"I play mahjong with my human coworkers a few times a season. They have such wonderful gossip!" My mother gestured toward the hallway. "Please, come in, both of you. Your father is grabbing groceries, but he'll be back."

I pinned my ears back with discomfort, as Jensi dragged me inside. The human removed his shoes at the doorstep, not wanting to track dirt inside, I presumed. Marcel hadn't been happy when I got mud on his couch back on Earth. How I wished I could rewind the clock to those days. This wasn't where I belonged anymore, and I needed to make a quick exit before my mother realized her son was an unlovable monster.

You want Jensi to remember you as the thoughtful, well-mannered young man you once were. Not as this thing.

"Listen, I'm not going to be staying long," I hissed.

Jensi issued an adamant *no* tail signal. "Nonsense! I'm going to fix you boys a nice lunch, and you're going to tell me everything you've been up to."

"I don't want to—I can't. Marc, can I have a minute to talk to her…alone?"

The human nodded, and turned an inquisitive gaze on my mother. She pointed with her tail toward the living room, at the far end of the hallway. I watched as the Terran faded from earshot, grateful for the knowledge that their hearing was subpar. What I was about to impart to my mother wasn't something I wanted Marcel to be aware of. It had crossed my mind to leave him a note, but that

might induce him to interfere with my plans.

Hurt flashed in Jensi's eyes. "How can you leave so soon after being gone for so long? Do we not matter to you at all, Slanek?"

"Look, I don't think I'm coming back, Mom. Don't ask why. There's things I have to do. I'm here for Marcel's sake, because the Kolshians 'cured' him and he has nowhere to go. Please, if you still love me, take him in and care for him. That's my only wish."

"I have nothing against your friend, but asking me to let him move in, with no set timeframe, is a big ask. I don't know him, and he's not my son. You are."

"Pretend Marcel is your son. He'll be a better son than I ever was. Please, I beg you. *Nothing* is more important to me than knowing he's safe."

"We'll help him get back on his feet, at least for a little while. Why don't you just stay a little longer, Slanek—you can't run off saying I'll never see you again! Tell me what's going on with you."

"It's not important. Whatever happens next, it wasn't your fault." I ducked back out the front door, shaking off her efforts to tug me back inside. "I'm sorry, Mom, I really am. Tell him I'm sorry too."

Without any further hesitation, I found myself sprinting as far away from home as my crooked legs would carry me. Memories of playing with my brother kindled my own tears, and the sobbing turned hysterical as I reminisced on my adventures with Marcel. The human believed I was getting help, but I knew it was too late for anything to be done. He hadn't wanted me to stay, given his claim that our friendship couldn't be restored to its former state. Jensi would ensure that he adjusted to Venlil Prime, and didn't end up destitute on the streets.

It's okay, Slanek. You were always a liability to him; he's better off without you. They all are.

My lungs burned, forcing me to slow from my breakneck run. The merciless sun beat down overhead, its reddish glow permeating my bushy fur like it was punishing me. I forced myself to keep moving; I couldn't afford to miss the train and allow Marcel or Jensi to chase after me. No matter what happened next, I hoped neither thought it was their fault. There was nothing that could make me regret my time in the exchange program, and meeting my gentle, vegetarian

predator.

I shimmied inside a train car just as the doors were closing, and collapsed on a bench with a heavy sigh. The knapsack on my back had felt light until now, since it contained only meager belongings. I slid it onto the floor in front of me, allowing myself a short break from hauling it around. An automated voice declared that we were heading to Orial, a farming village; I hadn't checked where the transit was headed before hopping on. I could keep riding until it reached a large city, one where I could find a spaceport. It gave me time to iron out my plans.

"Goodbye, Marcel. I won't disappoint you anymore," I whispered, bowing my head in mourning.

My paws retrieved the *Frankenstein* book he'd given me. I understood the exact parallel that was being drawn by the story. It was laughable that I'd thought that it was an allegory for humans being the unnatural monsters, when the novel first inspired me to pity them. The unholy, mix-and-match abomination, created by scientists that thought they could play god, who was then driven mad by the world around him—it was me. It was always me. Marcel implied as much when he implored me to find the text's lessons.

What I needed to do to fulfill my destiny was spelled out in the crisp pages. There was only one way to extol the rage surging in my heart at a deserved party, just as I had done with that arrogant Kolshian scientist. The execution had felt righteous and satisfying, a welcome release, until Marcel returned. If I was embracing my role as the monster, that meant I must kill my creator, after they lost everything they loved. With Nikonus' empire crumbling due to Terran interference, I was content to skip the first step and go for the jugular.

Nikonus, and by extension, the rest of his Kolshian underlings had done this to me; they were the reason for all of my suffering and deformities. The Commonwealth Chief must fall by my claw, if I were to feel better. Nobody else should suffer as the Venlil had. Those tentacled freaks shouldn't have the opportunity to harm anyone ever again! I was going to find my way off this world, and find someone who could smuggle me into Aafa. When I lorded over Nikonus' cold, lifeless corpse, after watching the light dim from his

eyes, then his punishment would be complete.

Justice will be served. It might not set my heart at peace, but I don't care. It's not about me—it's about them and what they've done.

Humans could never slip through Aafa's security to get close to Nikonus, but the Kolshians didn't take us modern Venlil seriously. There had to be a way to use stealth to my advantage. I stashed the book back in my knapsack, and set my mind to devising a plan. Attaining a weapon was the first order of business, though I had that figured out. I imagined an exterminators' office would give me one, if I claimed a "dog" was following me. How else could I protect myself from a predator? It was a shame they wouldn't hand out flamethrowers without guild membership.

A standard firearm would have to be enough to put Nikonus down for good. If this was the last mission I undertook, I accepted my fate. Perhaps the greatest incentive was that, if I succeeded, nobody would ever jeer Venlil as weak again. My focus turned to blocking out all memories of the human that was once my friend, and I committed myself to avenging both of our species.

Chapter 137

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: February 5, 2137

While the United Nations had no intention of gunning down Isif, human snipers had their sights trained on him in case the Arxur tried anything. I imagined their watchful presence was for the purpose of putting the other delegates at ease, as much as they could be with a carnivorous predator mounting the stage. The Chief Hunter had to slouch to reach the microphone, even after raising it to its full height. Fearful expressions marred the prey delegates' faces, with reptilian eyes aimed in their direction. Everything that stirred our instincts about Terrans was there tenfold in a gray; this was the face that haunted our nightmares, the visage of the cruelest race in existence.

A ginger-and-white Dossur leapt off Isif's head, and curled up on the podium right in front him. The delegation from Mileau's refugees hissed for the rodent to be removed, trying to signal her to come to them. The tiny herbivore who'd appeared alongside the Arxur showed no interest, yawning to express boredom. Many humans looked befuddled by her nonchalance, except for Zhao, who seemed to have encountered this Dossur before. Isif flared his nostrils, and a handful of delegates fainted. The Thafki ambassador was out like a light, while Gojid Minister Kiri swooned and folded like a lawn chair.

Primates rushed over to try to rouse the downed diplomats, and I turned to survey Noah's expression. The Terran ambassador had taken on an exterior of alarm, as though something awful occurred to him. His unmasked eyes raced across the room, scanning every Venlil; the glint in his brown irises was of personal concern. I gasped with my own worry, when the pieces clicked in my brain. Ambassador Williams was looking for Glim, and his pupils settled on a tail sticking out from under a dresser.

"Oh no," Noah murmured. "Seeing an Arxur must be traumatic for Glim…they tortured and penned him for years. He watched them eat other Venlil in front of him, daily."

The human pushed his way through the crowd, who were preoccupied with the most threatening predator in the room. Glim was catatonic under the dresser, shaking like a leaf. He was gasping out the words “not cattle”, before diverting to repeating the numbers on his brand. The Venlil rescue promptly vomited all over the floor, and Noah dragged him out to prevent him from choking. The astronaut shared a glance with me, before rushing the former-cattle Venlil from the room in his arms. The terror in Glim’s eyes seemed to pierce right through me.

How long had he been under there? Since he heard us discussing whether to allow Isif to speak?

The Chief Hunter either didn’t notice or didn’t comment on Glim’s departure, as he cleared his throat with a thunderous growl. More of the delegates cowered, and unlike the humans’ apologetic demeanor, the Arxur seemed irked. He hissed something into the Dossur’s ear; worried gazes dotted the audience, as many assumed the gray was leaning in to chow into her soft throat. The rodent chittered back with an angry expression, and made a dramatic gesture at the microphone.

Isif sighed in surrender. “Hello. I do not expect to be granted access to your meetings or to join your association. I merely recognize the pragmatic concern that we have a common enemy, and per the information provided by human intelligence services, Betterment and the Federation are two sides of the same knife. While I cannot offer any recompense for the ills you have suffered, know it will end with me and my rebellion.”

“After everything you’ve done, you w-want us to work with you?” Nuela, the Krakotl representative, challenged.

“There are Krakotl here? Humans are so soft, and their willingness to speak with you…after what you did to Earth, reflects the shortcomings of their empathy. You are the face of the extermination fleet, and I do not wish to speak or work with you.”

“Oh, so if you challenge your government, after leading atrocities your whole life, you’re fine? The Krakotl were used and thrown away, without k-knowing we were omnivores. If I had that information when voting on Earth’s fate, things would’ve been different, *gray*.”

“If I had an alternative that did not get me killed, things would’ve

been different. You had a choice, the ability to speak up without losing your head, and you didn't. Why?"

"I don't owe you any explanation, you abominable monstrosity. I didn't vote for you to get your nasty eyes on the best pickings…oh sorry, I mean, 'speak to us.' We'd never fight alongside someone as unscrupulous and repulsive as you."

"SILENCE!" Secretary-General Zhao bellowed. "I expect all guests of the Sapient Coalition to behave with the decorum and rationality befitting professional diplomats. We aren't the Federation. We don't conduct debates and decide issues by lobbing insults, no matter our personal feelings."

If Noah were here rather than tending to Glim, he would've remarked on how difficult it'd been to get a word in edgewise, with the constant interruptions during his Aafa speech. The jeers rang in my ears as fresh as yesterday; Cupo had led the heckling, casting skepticism on the notion of arboreal eyes and suggesting humanity would turn on us. The Mazic was much more partial to Noah now than in those days, and hadn't hesitated to shield him from Coji.

However, the large mammal had voted against allowing Isif to speak. I imagined he was having difficulty holding his tongue. Humanity should be appreciative of Cupo's attempts to be respectful of the forum, knowing that his true thoughts likely aligned with Nuela's rhetoric. This debate could turn heated in a hurry, and I wasn't sure I trusted an Arxur to rein in his temper. The Terrans couldn't let this powder keg erupt into flames.

Yotul ambassador Laulo curled his lip in defiance. "What is it you want, Arxur?"

"I seek to ally where beneficial to weaken our enemies, and I am willing to attack specific targets in exchange for resources. Primarily, I seek a non-aggression pact. This war should not continue in the event we both triumph over our adversaries, yes? This death cycle must cease," Isif retorted, flicking his tongue.

"S-so you'll what…stop raiding us and eating us?" Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen spoke up. "I don't see how we could ever believe that you wouldn't relax our guard, just to launch a sneak attack."

"Do you not recognize that you have the most shrewd, resourceful, *relentless* species on your side? A humanity with actual time to

perfect their craft—it will be suicide to go up against them in a few years. Look how rapidly they advance, they learn, they innovate. Similar to your feelings, I have no guarantee that you wouldn't see my kind extinct, as soon as we try to isolate ourselves. I know you think we do not deserve to exist."

"You don't!" Nuela squawked. "You're a bunch of bloodthirsty demons."

"The Archives will show you it was not always so cut-and-dry, bird. Now shut your beak. We cannot be friends, obviously, but I would hope, many generations from now, our descendants might be civilized with each other. That each of our factions may regard the other's lives with some minimal value. Would that not be better than this cursed existence?"

A Dossur diplomat leapt around, held aloft by a Mazic, trying to draw attention. "You're keeping one of ours as a hostage on this very floor. Who is she, and what have you done to her?"

"Ah, this is Felra. I rescued her from Mileau, and we are friends. She is silly and irritating, but does she look like a hostage to you?! I feel like *her* hostage!"

"I made Siffy come here," Felra squeaked, a prideful note coloring her voice. "Speaking at the summit was my idea. I told him he should try to make peace. Isif was never taught how to have empathy, but I'm certain he has a good heart!"

"For the record, nobody made me do anything. I believe this is a delusional, fruitless endeavor, and the humans…much like all of you…don't want me here tarnishing their reputation. I am surprised I was allowed to speak to you."

"Then why did you come here at all?" Mazic President Cupo finally challenged. "To test how much you could manipulate us?"

"My reason for coming is somewhat to express my remorse over the role I played in your historical atrocities, because it is my sincere feeling. Also, practically, I cannot overcome the Dominion alone, so it is a strategic move to express the benefits that could be gained from a reluctant partnership. Zhao touts the idea of 'victory, at all costs', yes? The cost is for us to tolerate each other."

"What if I don't want to tolerate you?"

"Then that was the expected outcome. I merely will ask that the

United Nations pass along back channels to communicate with me, if you desire. Each state may reach out, should they be interested in any non-aggression pacts. Thank you for granting me an audience; I will not take any more of your time."

Zhao gave a hand signal to the UN soldiers, who escorted the Arxur from the room without hesitation. I considered the speech I'd just heard; it was surprising that the carnivore had been able to iterate his full pitch, and have his points listened to by prey. Isif's rhetoric mirrored my own ideas, recognizing that friendship was impossible, and suggesting a pragmatic alliance instead. Risking open collaboration before the election would be political suicide, but perhaps the Venlil Republic could accept his proposal off of the public's radar.

Isif's stunt proved that an Arxur can act civilized, and communicate more than hungry threats. The question is if this demolished humanity's chances of securing support for the Coalition.

The majority of species had consented to the Arxur's brief admittance, and supported the Terrans in the face of mockery. Secretary-General Zhao seemed keen to get the proceedings back on track; serious entreaties were needed at this moment, rather than festivities. It was a shame, since I sensed how desperately the humans needed a happy moment to cling to. The guests had enjoyed the earlier messing about to a certain degree, judging by how they'd cheered Noah's faceplanting stunt on.

This was supposed to be an event calling for unity, and celebrating the diplomatic tribulations Earth had overcome. As the UN's leader rushed to mingle with leery diplomats, I committed myself to winning over anyone who was put off by the Arxur's visit. A part of me was darkly curious if others were considering his offer, though the cynical side of me doubted it. After how the peaceful Terrans were mistreated time and again, I had little faith in the collective to pass fair judgments.

I padded up to Mazic President Cupo, bracing myself for damage control. "I was impressed with how you handled yourself. The humans had a tough situation on their hands there; they need Isif militarily. You seemed to understand that."

"Khoa owes our continued existence to humanity. Though I vehemently disagree with treating that monster as a person, the UN

still has my full support, Tarva," Cupo replied. "I see what you're trying to do, and it's not necessary. The Terrans simply can't believe that predators are evil, because *they* are not evil. It's understandable."

Not accurate, but roll with it. "Perhaps there's another good predator race out there? Like Zhao said, sapients choose what they are."

"Sure, but blood-drinking killers are a lot more likely to choose evil by default. There's a disconnect between that practice and good motives. Even the humans would agree, and that's why they've bettered themselves through science. Their curiosity brings out the best in them."

"Well, I'm glad you noticed how humans adore science and find meaning in their surroundings," I dodged. "Sara would be happy to hear that her field is appreciated. Please, excuse me."

That was one name to check off the list of potential discontented parties; the slightly-misguided Cupo's support hadn't been jeopardized by our unwanted guest. I noticed a dejected Nuela slinking into Zhao's circle, with her indigo wings folded unhappily. The Krakotl had her body turned away from the human; I wondered if she was afraid of him, after he lobbied for the Arxur's introduction. Scurrying off from my private conversation with the Mazic, I joined the Secretary-General's circle to offer support.

The Krakotl, of all species, have no right to challenge humanity. I was surprised, and perhaps a little displeased, that they were invited here, when Earth's gaping wounds are still fresh.

"I'm glad you're alright, Telikinn," Zhao was saying to the Thafki diplomat, who looked groggy after fainting. "I'd love to get back on track discussing a Thafki settlement, under our protection. Somewhere you can restore your society, without being targeted for attack as soon as you plant your roots."

Telikinn slumped his shoulders. "Before you came along, there were 12,000 of us left, because of the Arxur. The Federation leaders made sure no one came to h-help us, but they didn't helm the raid. The grays did the deed."

"Had I known the Arxur was coming in advance, I never would've allowed it. Humanity understands how sensitive this is to you and your people. All I want is to help the Thafki flourish. You're

important to us personally, enough that we never gave up on calling you our friends. Please, in turn, don't give up on humanity because of this one hiccup."

"Everything with you ends with a r-representative dying, the Arxur showing up, or a planet getting attacked."

"You're right. We've failed to keep people safe. This incursion was a lapse in our security, for which I am unspeakably sorry. We can do better…humans aren't quitters. Your survival and your freedom are what we fight for, alongside our own."

Nuela flapped her wings. "Human? I know you may not want to speak to me…"

"No, please. I brought you here as an olive branch, not to hold Earth over your head. I don't wish to condemn your species. While few would agree with me, I think the fact that Krakotl were the first victims changes our perspective. This is a fresh start for us all…or, it can be."

"I just wished to apologize for how I phrased my words to the filthy gray. Not that I regret that, just…I realized how my 'nasty eyes' comment could be taken the wrong way by humans, who also have binocular eyes. Your eyes aren't nearly as bad as theirs!"

Zhao coyly lifted his visor for a second. "Are you sure about that?"

The Krakotl froze, stuttering for a few moments. "I…um…n-no. W-worse in person, videos don't do the w-whole 'looking right at you' justice. What I meant to say is that yours are… unfortunate, and theirs are nasty."

"Is that so?" The Secretary-General issued a gruff laugh, fitting his visor back over his eyes. "For what it's worth, many humans get anxiety from other people staring at them. It can be most unsettling, and I understand that your temper flared with Isif. All is forgiven."

Nuela shook her wings out, an attempt to flush the fear chemicals from her body. Telikinn had looked away when Zhao started to remove his visor; the Thafki didn't want to risk passing out twice in the span of an hour. I couldn't help but snicker at the frightful diplomats, along with the amused, human-accustomed Laulo. The Yotul was having a full belly laugh, and I shared his view on the situational absurdity. Gazing into a human's eyes was intoxicating —a way of peering through a window to their soul, especially when

it was Noah's loving gaze.

For anyone who knows the Terrans well, it's impossible to be scared of them. Seeing Laulo project that sentiment, I can tell the Yotul will be an easy vote to join the Coalition.

The positive outlook was that no parties outside the Duerten Shield had walked out or become hostile to humans, which was a victory under the circumstances. The real test would be how many committed to join as a member state, when the vote took place in a few days. Outlining any diplomatic technicalities, discussing a vision for a post-war future, and confirming signatures to the various treaties from would-be entrants were next on the agenda. For some planets, FTL comms would need to patch them into legislatures at home, to vote on document ratifications.

I was hopeful that humanity would succeed in its mission to found a better league of planets. No species had fought harder, with unrequited kindness, to gain friends among the stars. A binding agreement to cement that humans were not alone in their quest for peace would mean the world to me.

Chapter 138

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: February 9, 2137

The rest of the Summit was uneventful, with standard diplomatic talks setting a mundane atmosphere that reminded me of any other bureaucratic affair. My speech railed against the actions of the Archives, taken against herbivores for seeking self-determination. I appealed to the connections the Venlil held for centuries, and what the Federation was supposed to stand for. Exchange program guests followed me, talking about the connections they forged with predators. Braylen and Laulo spoke about why they helped Earth, testifying to humanity's innocence.

Most of the speakers, however, were human. Ambassador Williams got a proper stint on stage with a heavily-prepared statement, rehashing what he'd said on Aafa in full detail. Secretary-General Zhao handed the floor off to undersecretaries to detail various tenets of the charter. Extradition, interstellar police, and travel policies were proposed, followed by opinions on which substances should be controlled. Currency exchanges, labor laws, and trade were discussed by another human official.

The tricky issue was that of exterminators and the environment, after the next Terran floated the idea of conservation. While the notion of preserving predators had been scrubbed from their speech, other diplomats caught on to the underlying intent. The humans deflected back to "monitoring ecosystem impacts" and preventing threats to sustainability. Their immediate pivot to colonization procedures and settling territorial disputes through the Coalition forum wasn't lost on me.

It was brave of Zhao to subtly throw condemnation on the guild, before any signatories have committed to his Coalition. The humans truly hate exterminators and predator disease.

Terrans didn't need to raise the issue of predator disease, beyond Sara Rosario claiming she would share research "in the interest of cooperation and transparency." I had a sneaking suspicion that humans would use the Universal Declaration of Sapient Rights to

lobby for the humane treatment of mentally ill individuals. Talsk was also kicked down the road, to be decided by whoever chose to join the Coalition. Overall, the predators covered all their bases, and managed not to garner too much outrage from coveted allies. The Arxur visit and the anti-exterminator guests muddied the waters, so we'd have to see whether those occurrences would have negative impacts on the vote.

"Boo." Ambassador Williams wrapped his arms around me from behind, and rested his chin on my shoulders. "Aw, I didn't scare you a little? I wanted a little payback for all the times Venlil approach from the side, forgetting we can't see you."

"You know what still scares me about you, Noah? How much I love you," I murmured.

The human released his grip. "Perhaps we feel the same. How deep is your love? So fearsome that it rocks the soul like a gust?"

"…you've said that before, haven't you?"

"Uh…I might've been writing a poem for you for Valentines. That day doesn't mean a thing to you, so I guess I can relay part of it now. It's not very good anyway."

"Go on. I need something to give me confidence; I'm the first on the voters' roster. For all I know, I'll be the only 'yes' vote."

"Okay. Ahem…

Since I've met you, love is not just a word,

It sings deep within, unspoken and unheard,

A passion that blows all concerns to dust,

So fearsome that it rocks the soul like a gust.

To rest certain that I am understood and secure,

I'll cherish you forever to see that we'll endure.

Well, Tarva, I know it's corny and short, but maybe the thought…"

I chuckled. "That was actually pretty good. I could hear the rhyme and flow before I caught the meaning. Who knew my science dork was a poet?"

"…it can be our secret. Right, I think they're about to call for the votes, so I can stop embarrassing myself. Good luck, Governor!"

I could sense Noah winking at me, even through his eye visor, just by the slight movement of his facial muscles. The Secretary-General had been delivering a formal thanks to the attendees, and I could see the nervousness in his stance. He summoned me as the first voter, symbolic of how we were humanity's original friends, and asked for the others to form a queue. Each diplomat obliged, and I waltzed past the various aliens. Their expressions were impermeable, granting no insight to their votes.

I accepted the microphone from Zhao, who offered a few gracious claps. "Hello. There has never been a species which I loved as much as my own; I love Terrans for their caring nature and their innocence. Despite all that has happened, humanity hasn't lost themselves. They never wavered in their commitment to peace, even as they were forced into a grim war they wanted no part in. I'm proud to announce that the Venlil Republic will join the Sapient Coalition alongside our wonderful friends."

Zhao embraced me in a hug, before I dismounted the stage with polite tail swishes to the audience. Noah gave me an encouraging nod as I returned; my stomach was a bundle of nerves. How many species would be willing to join the predators' alliance? There was no guarantee leaders wouldn't get cold feet, or dither over the UN's Arxur ties. Ambassador Laulo was mounting the stage, which brought me relief.

The Yotul rushed to the front of the queue. If anyone votes yes, it should be him; this could give humanity's cause some momentum.

Laulo surveyed the audience. "What humanity proposed for contacting other cultures is certainly better than the Federation's heavy-handed annihilation, and the mockery that ensues. The Yotul were looked down upon and silenced, but the predators never hesitated to stand up for us as equals. They want us *all* to be equal. I finally have the respect I thought I'd never get. The Yotul offer a resounding 'yes' vote, and pledge everything we can offer to the ideals of the Sapient Coalition."

The marsupial flicked his ears in gratitude, and Zhao returned the gesture as best as he could by dipping his head. Gojid Minister Kiri was trundling up the stage, and I recalled her desire of safety for her people's remnants. It wasn't clear if she'd see that safety in a union formed by the species the Gojids had been at war with mere

months ago. Additionally, the spiky leader had been displeased about the humans defending the exact Arxur responsible for the cradle's fall. This vote could be a curt no.

Kiri curled her claws around the microphone. "Colonies and refugees. That is all we have left. We wouldn't have that without the predators—the *people* we attacked—fighting, and dying, to save us, while we wanted to kill them. They were honorable in a way we did not deserve. You know, we never officially ceased our war with humanity. Let my yes vote, as the highest-remaining member of the Gojidi Union, serve to erase all uncertainty; we are on Earth's side today."

That was a surprise; I could feel the tension lifting from the predator diplomats, as the first few votes turned in their favor. Each commitment injected a dose of positivity into the dialogue around humanity. After constant suspicion and accusations, the genuine kindness was moving a few primates to tears. They deserved to hear affirmative messages from all of us at the Summit. I squeezed Noah's wrist with my tail.

Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen took the stage next. "We healed innocent civilians in the aftermath of Earth, where a billion lives were taken without cause. We've seen their homeworld, and their doctors' code has reminded us of our purpose—to do no harm. My brother's pleas to give humanity a chance were a gift to my administration. Colia and her government votes to join the Sapient Coalition, by the Parliament's decision 62-3."

Unsurprisingly, the three species who came to Earth's aid all were early votes to join humanity's league. A positive start—though our voting record can't stay perfect forever, can it?

Thafki representative Telikinn followed the quadrupeds, a nervous look on his face. "The Federation allowed us to die for the crime of having a semiaquatic nature. I guess it's no surprise that they never offered once to help us rebuild our lost heritage and home. You know who extended that offer the first time we met face-to-face? The humans. The Thafki Advocacy, for this alone, votes to join the Sapient Coalition."

Considering how quickly the blue-gray ambassador had been to run for the bar and avoid Zhao's exposed eyes, that was a surprise. Telikinn wanted to open full diplomatic relations with predators?

Thafki acceptance was an encouraging indicator to the temperature of the room. If the United Nations could deliver on the promise of a proper colony, that would be invaluable in helping the Advocacy return to relevance.

“What more do we need to say than saving Khoa?” Mazic President Cupo asked, succeeding the Thafki. “The people we thought were our friends came to conquer us, while the predators we doubted and scorned saved us for nothing in return. The Presidium remembers this, and we issue unconditional acceptance to take our place within the Sapient Coalition.”

Noah snorted to himself. “Long way from never trusting predators, huh?”

“Your speech is the reason Cupo, and all these species, started on the path to accepting humans,” I whispered. “You’re the original inspiration. The spark that lit the fire.”

The Onkari and Verin ambassadors took the stage together, with the former speaking for both. “We are grateful the Suleans put us in touch with humanity. Many neutral parties had time to rethink the Terrans, and who they are as a race. When we learned we were former omnivores, we felt alone. The predators welcomed us, and everyone who lost their heritage. The Onkari and Verin governments stand together as deepest allies, for this unequivocal step of joining the Sapient Coalition.”

That left eight entrants into our union, with no votes to oppose them; the humans could hardly contain their jubilance, and there were thirty species remaining to speak. Quick acceptance speeches from the Drilvar and the galactically-distant Paltans rounded out the numbers to ten. The United Nations had cynical expectations before this Summit commenced, stating they’d be happy with a mere dozen allies. Despite all that had gone wrong, enough sentiment had swung in our favor.

Tilfish Governor Birla scuttled to the podium. “My thanks to the Terrans is a personal one; for saving me, my son, and helping me with a troubling concern. They could’ve done anything when they accepted our surrender, but they’re giving us a chance at freedom. They fought for Sillis, even when it seemed like they’d left, in spite of our participation in the raid. We don’t deserve to join the Sapient Coalition, but I accept the offer with gratitude.”

The Harchen, the other vassal, mirrored that sentiment, before relinquishing the podium to the Fissans. Ambassador Halmina seemed pleased to have reached the stage before the Nevoks' successor to Tossa, and declared that she'd join since the Coalition might soon be the only bargaining opportunity left. Eager to outshine their rivals, Tossa's replacement went on a lengthy tirade about how the humans needed the Nevoks. Both hypercapitalist species signed on, though their speeches weren't quite as inspiring as the others. Four converted neutrals followed, each penning the dotted line.

The Sulean-Iftalis trotted onto the stage, suggesting they'd been smoothing the waters and guiding the last few speakers. I thought they were a certain vote to join humanity's team, after all the diplomatic legwork they'd done. However, I was curious to see what the sister species from a single world had to say about our predator friends. Noah had his two fingers twisted atop each other, hoping that the perfect voting streak would hold up throughout the tally.

"They all love you," I whispered to the astronaut. "Everything you've done has mattered, to a lot of people."

The Terran ambassador bobbed his head. "Sometimes, I thought no one would ever see us as anything more than monsters. It felt like no matter what we did, it wasn't appreciated."

"That's not true. Listen to what they're saying, all the things you've done in such a short time! Here's a duo that are sure to sing your praises."

"Humanity answered the call, when we discovered our sister species had been slighted," the Sulean ambassador was saying. "What they gave us was the scientific truth, derived from a methodology of scraping fact from bits of stone. They then risked their lives to recover the Archives info and give us concrete answers. We decide who we are, like Zhao said, and that's humanity's friends. The dual species of Jild will join the Coalition."

That was only the beginning of the tide of agreement. Seven more species accepted the proposal, and a palpable fog of emotion hung in the room. It would mean a lot to humanity, if every species here voted to join. My pleasure was soured as Nuela took the stage; she'd helped greenlight the bombs that struck Earth's flesh before she

turned separatist. Hopefully, the Krakotl had the sense to see that her species didn't belong in the humans' inner circle. Whatever Zhao espoused about an olive branch, the Terrans didn't deserve to interact with their archenemies on a daily basis.

The Tilfish and Harchen should've had the decency to reject the offer too, but the Krakotl are particularly egregious.

Nuela tossed her sunset-orange beak, shaking out her feathers. "I offered to turn myself in, the first time I could speak to Zhao alone here. Unfortunately, he expressed no desire to have me charged. The humans were innocent, and we persecuted them to no end. I came here to apologize, but if they wish for the Krakotl to join, I must honor their wishes. Whatever I have belongs to the Sapient Coalition. We're in."

A few disgruntled murmurs passed through the crowd, but the representatives held their tongues, knowing that humanity would strike down discrimination on their floor. Three "yes" voters followed the avian, but my focus wandered. My thoughts briefly flitted to the election, and how joining with this many species after the break from the Federation might turn voters against me. If securing the Venlil Republic's place in galactic politics was my last act, I could live with that. The race would be a challenge, but it would be arduous for Veln to pull us out of the Coalition.

Unity in the face of this war, and motivation given through outside kindness, is what humanity needs to make the final push to Aafa. Forget your competition at home, Tarva—let Noah and Zhao etch this feeling into their memories.

Species after species passed by Zhao, and the line dwindled without a single species rejecting a spot on our team. I thought about Elias Meier's vision of galactic peace, and his desperate outreach to anyone who would listen. The current Secretary-General had brought that dream to fruition, and made prudent moves on the war front to fend off the Federation at the same time. Despite my early doubts, Zhao had proved a worthy successor to lead Earth, and pursued harmony from his own angles. I could sense that he was proud of pulling the Summit off.

"So we're the last ones? All of you have chosen your side?" The final species in the line was Alar, the Dossur ambassador, who'd kept to the back to avoid being stepped on. "Mileau has been

captured for months, by a fleet larger than any we've seen. The humans have given everything they can to saving us, and they're the reason anyone, including myself, escaped. Being one of the larger species makes them intimidating, but I find they have larger hearts in turn. Their compassion is their greatest strength. The Federation pushed us into their arms, so it's a given that we join this alliance."

Silence permeated the auditorium, with the tally remarkably sitting at a *unanimous* vote to join. The chorus of heartfelt praises to humanity, the predator species that opened all of our eyes, were still ringing in our hosts' ears. Noah sank to his knees and wept, unable to fathom such decisive support being lent to Earth. If one species was worth sacrificing his life on Aafa, how much more did 38 friends mean to my astronaut? I wrapped a paw around his shoulder, and tugged his shaking head toward me.

"Oh Tarva, after everything that happened to Earth, it's really nice to know that I set some positive events in motion," Noah sniffled. "Why couldn't it have always been like this? There's nothing I wouldn't have done."

Mucus dropped from his bruised nose, as the emotions he'd been carrying spilled out. Secretary-General Zhao had wandered back to the podium, head briefly turning toward us. Other aliens were watching us, though their attention quickly shifted back to the Chinese diplomat. The UN leader couldn't find the words to address the crowd, and he swallowed a lump in his own throat. I could see that he was choked up, though he managed to get out a few words.

"We have work to do…friends," the human coughed, clearing his throat. "Thank you. Only now can I truly say that humanity is not alone in the universe. We're going to make this community special, because we must. Together, we'll turn the tides of this war and restore autonomy to every world. Now, before we pack this up, let's have a celebration of us!"

After extending their hands in a plea for friendship for months, humanity had found the eager comrades they desired. I soothed the overwhelmed Noah, and thought about how far I'd come from seeing him as a despicable monster. The Terrans deserved an outcome that was in their favor, without any caveats; for the first time since their introduction to the galaxy, events had shaken out

that way. My gaze swept over the various diplomats, considering how this diverse alliance would approach the challenges that faced us all.

The predators had much to teach everyone here about civility. I had faith that we could come up with solutions to our dilemmas, and undo the crushing dogma that pervaded our societies. The future could be bright under Earth's guidance, paving the way for better days to come.

Chapter 139

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Civilian*

Date [standardized human time]: February 13, 2137

The Duerten homeworld was a stormy place during monsoon season; its name was Kalqua, but I didn't care much for dissecting the linguistic intricacies of any titles. Skalga, world of death—that was a name from a species of warriors. Even that nomenclature meant little compared to the sole place that mattered, the one that I razed in my dreams: Aafa. So despite the rift between the Duerten Homogeneity and the United Nations, my concern was using the gray avians to complete my mission. That was why I decided to come here; I had plenty of time to concoct a plan, as I drifted from stop-to-stop on the train back on Skalga.

The pittance I'd received from the Venlil-Human exchange program gave me the money I needed to reach out to unscrupulous parties. That entailed looking no further than the Nevok industry; as the losing parties of a trade war with the Fissans, they would do anything to make a quick buck. I forked over half the fee up-front in exchange for travel to Kalqua. The Nevoks weren't suicidal, so their "unofficial" smuggling enterprise wouldn't take me to Aafa, but they still had open trade with the Duerten. It was up to me to negotiate a deal to make the trek to the Federation's home.

I opened my knapsack, spotting the gun tucked next to the book. The rural exterminators office in Celgel Falls didn't seem to recognize me, and was delighted when I'd floated the idea of taking out dogs. Those Venlil made it clear they wouldn't mind if a human "predator" got on the wrong end of a bullet. It was all I could do not to mow each of them down then and there. My impatience to get to business was growing now too, with the itch in my claws craving the pull of the trigger.

The damn Nevok has been in a holding pattern aboveworld for hours. Something about it being too stormy to land safely in the Duerten capital, Liluat.

"Why can't we descend now?" I barked. "I was also a pilot. I know we can fly through choppy conditions."

The Nevok flicked his ears. "It's against local regulations. Too many

crashes on Duerten soil, especially with smaller spacecraft. They'll fine me at the docking bay if I go now, so no can do."

"I'll cover the fine, with a little extra for you. How much to go *right now*?"

"A thousand credits."

I gagged at the figure, but fished out my holopad regardless. Missed messages showed on the old chat app I'd used during the exchange program, but I navigated to my bank account instead. I had wanted to leave something to Jensi and Marcel to improve their welfare, but what was important was terminating Nikonus's life as soon as possible. The Nevok looked satisfied when I transferred the requested amount, and punched in the commands on the piloting interface. My ears pinned back against my head, with the actualization of my plans unfolding.

As a recognizable figure across the galaxy, I wasn't expecting the Duerten to give a human-friendly Venlil a hero's welcome. They thought our sweet predators were as good as dirt, but at least they weren't actively engaged in war with them. Anyone who threatened Earth's safety or the average Terran's welfare needed to be put down. In the past, people like me would've never allowed someone to terrorize our herd. To think what they'd done to Skalga was worse than the bioweapon the Kolshians gassed Marcel with…I wonder what their species would look like with specially-crafted afflictions.

"Hey, what is wrong with you, Slanek? We're here, and they've locked the docking clamps until I pay the fines. You were in *such* a hurry, and now you've got a thousand-parsec-stare at the runway. Go! Get off of my ship!" the Nevok barked.

I jolted back to alertness, slinging my knapsack over my shoulders. "Thanks for the ride."

Hustling out onto the runway, rain assaulted me from above and trickled into my ears. I spotted Duerten soldiers marching toward the shuttle with irate wing flaps. I raised my paws to show my intent to surrender to the security, and halted my forward momentum to ensure I wasn't perceived as a threat to the herd's safety. The avians looked alarmed to discern that a Venlil had slipped through their borders via a Nevok charter; several guards immediately drew their weapons. Forcing myself to remain calm, I

knelt onto the pavement without waiting for instruction.

Two guards pushed me onto my stomach, planting their webbed feet against my neck. The Duerten chained my arms behind my back, and hauled me to my paws. They called in my arrest, naming me as "the famous human *pet,* Slanek"; I gritted my teeth at that moniker. Smoothing out my fur through a concerted effort, I issued a request to speak with someone high-ranking in the government. The avians' suspicion intensified after I verbalized that desire, though they passed it along the correct channels.

You're completely at their mercy, so might as well play nice. They have no requisite not to hear your plea…though I don't know what happens if they say "no."

It took several minutes sitting in the back of a stationary police car, but clearance came through for me to be taken to Ambassador Coji's office. The Duerten representative to Earth was fresh back from the Summit, having slammed the door on humanity's diplomatic offers once and for all. I released a sigh of relief, as the car began moving, and I offered as little as possible to guards prompting me for my reasons. What I had to say was for official ears only. Nobody could know my plans to annihilate Nikonus. Impatience caused me to fidget, and the bland colors of the structures didn't give me much to look at.

It felt like hours later when we finally arrived, passing under a billboard that said, *Sapient predator? An oxymoron.* I wished they hadn't put the window's visual translator on to convert text to Venlil tongue. A Duerten guard hauled me out of the car, granting me an unhindered look at the embassy. The construction was built to withstand strong winds, with metal plates over the windows, and entrance hatches on each floor for any natives that chose to fly inside. I was forced to take the long way around, trundling through the lobby to a rusted elevator that clearly hadn't seen much use.

"Is this even safe to ride in? It doesn't look like it's been well-kept," I grumbled.

The security officer huffed, smashing the third button with his wing. "Oh, so you talk now, just to question us? You are an intruder here, and you will do what we say. I doubt it will be worth our time to hear you out at all; I can't fathom why you came to Kalqua, with…who you are."

I swished my tail with annoyance, but said nothing as the elevator ratcheted up to the third floor. There were periodic creaks and scraping noises as it ascended, along with a painfully slow pause that made me think we were stuck for a second. The door slid open, revealing an array of private offices; most were shut, though I could see lights on under the frames. I was brought to the far end of the hall, and deposited into Coji's sprawling office, still chained. The Duerten ambassador had pictures of Noah's face on the wall with his binocular eyes carved out. If I wasn't desperate to get to Aafa, I would've never beseeched her aid.

"I thought my guard had misidentified you, but no, it's really Slanek…friend of that captured human. Is this some deranged plea by Tarva to get me to return, and apologize for her audacious stunt at the Summit? If I didn't know better, I'd think that *predator Noah* was her lover," Coji sneered.

I issued a nervous laugh. "That's ridiculous. Ambassador Noah just interacts with her a lot, and he's the one who convinced her to trust humans. I know people say Tarva is too attached to humans, but don't be offensive."

"I'll be whatever I want. You're in my office, on Kalqua, and we don't worry about hurting predators' feelings here."

"Well, I'm not here on behalf of my government or humanity. I'm here because of what the Kolshians did to Skalga; it's personal. They ruined my life, they turned me into this! I know you're angry about what they did to you, so we can help each other. I'm gonna kill Nikonus if it's the last thing I do."

The Duerten stared at me in disbelief, before she burst out laughing. "I know the 'weakest species in the galaxy' is made up, but you must be out of your mind! You're still crippled and…I can't imagine how that would *ever* work! Besides, it's something a predator disease patient would say. Again, I reiterate, the fact that you came here is beyond deranged. Why us?"

"Because you're the only one with motives to make them pay who could actually get to Aafa. I thought about every detail, I need this to work, so just trust me. You could schedule a meeting under the ruse of the Kolshians knowing the Duerten walked out of humanity's summit. Tell them you want to meet for reconciliation. Nikonus would love to weaken Earth and siphon off their allies, so

he'll bite."

"That's…actually halfway decent, Slanek. I don't see why we need you."

I perked my ears up. "You'll never get inside the hall with a weapon; security will catch you and you'll be blown. If you think you can attack Nikonus unarmed, you'll just get gunned down by his guards who follow him everywhere, and *are* armed. It keeps you from making yourself a target. Better yet, even if I fail, you have the cover of me being a stowaway from the Summit or something. Some predatorshit."

Coji craned her neck in thought, and her eyes lit up with something resembling schadenfreude. I knew that I had the Duerten then and there; I'd read them right, gauging that they wanted to obliterate the Kolshians after the Archives' info. My guess was based on the fact that they were willing to communicate with humanity, who it was no secret they hated, after the Homogeneity learned about being turned into mindless drones.

The ambassador tossed her beak. "How do you think you can get to Aafa, let alone with a weapon?"

"I read a human myth about a so-called Trojan Horse," I replied.

"Was this plot a *human* idea?!"

"No! They stripped me off my military rank because of what I did at Mileau. I just drew inspiration from the…predator trickery. They're best at it, you know."

"Oh, I know. I'm not surprised a Venlil saw that truth eventually. What is this Trojan Horse?"

"My version of it? Make a gift statue for the Kolshians, line it with materials that will disrupt sensor readings, and stick me in the base. My guess is that they'll put it in the garden outside; you bring Nikonus to see it, wherever it is, and I'll pop out. We can't put a slit for me to shoot from the inside without risking me being sighted. I just need an escape lever, and a motion sensor for when you direct him in front of my exit."

"I see. You want a weapon from us, I imagine?"

"I already had a gun in my bag, which I'm sure your guards found, so it can be stashed in the statue with me. Don't worry, I've gunned

down Kolshians before—you don't want to know—so you don't need to worry about me getting cold feet. I can handle myself."

"What's your escape plan?"

I don't have one.

I tugged at the chains around my paws with discomfort. "My plan is to run off, and meet you back at the ship. You can make a lot of noise and cause a distraction, if you want to help. The less details you know about that specific part, the better; I don't want to tip off the Kolshians chasing me."

"That makes sense." Coji seemed to buy my lie, and she shuffled the papers on her desk. "I'll bring it up to the people who can actually make this decision. If they say yes, which I suspect they will, we'll start work on this statue. What should the likeness be?"

"Playing to narcissism always works. Nikonus boasts about all the things he did to other prey species, so it's clear his ego wants people to know. It could be a statue of him."

"Killed by an idol to himself…it's poetic. They hated Duerten for having opinions, and speaking our minds. They don't want us to speak—fine, we'll do things the other way. For what it's worth, I appreciate you bringing us this…*opportunity*, and I hope you succeed. I imagine the collective feels the same."

Coji summoned the guard that had brought me in, and ordered him to bring me to a visitors room on the first floor. As I looked over my shoulder, her gray silhouette swooped out of the hatch in her office, and the bird took flight. My mind harkened back to when the wingless humans had jumped out of a spacecraft, with me sedated in tow, and dropped to the cradle's surface. Loss clawed at my heart, as I pictured Marcel giving Nulia pain meds for her shattered leg. The Gojid child he wound up considering his own, who played with "Uncle Slanek" and "Mawsle" often.

What I wouldn't give to be innocent like that again. Before Earth was hit, we were so happy, and unaware of the Federation's unholy meddling. I had no clue what I really was.

Tears welled in my eyes; the finality of this assassination attempt was certain. When Coji fulfilled my request to travel to Aafa (and after observing her reaction, I was certain her people would heed the call), there was no turning back from deep within the

Federation's heart. It was too late to select any route other than vengeance for me, and I struggled with what I knew came next. After deposing my creator, this was part of the tale where my own life of misery should come to a close. With how I'd changed, that might be for the greater good, but I was chilled by the prospect of non-existence.

My tale didn't have to be an exact replica of ancient Earth literature…it wouldn't be. However, my non-existent escape plan meant the end was near for me. I wished I'd said a proper goodbye to Marcel; the red-haired human would be upset by what I was about to do. He was under the impression that I was getting help, and we'd never had the opportunity to patch up our friendship—though that hadn't seemed possible, ever. The Venlil he'd befriended was already dead.

Whether predator disease was a lie or not, I felt like it was a fair diagnosis for me now. Any explanation I could've afforded Marcel would've only made him more disappointed in my warped mind. This would be the last time I disappointed my human. However, given my odd unwillingness to die, I would hope to find another way to disappear than expiry. My schemes had been crafty enough up to this point, so perhaps I could think on my feet in the moment.

One thing was for sure: I was no longer going to freeze or let fear triumph during calamity. If this was my last adventure, I planned to go out in what humans called a blaze of glory.

Chapter 140

Memory transcription subject:*Slanek, Venlil Civilian*

Date [standardized human time]: February 20, 2137

The lack of ventilation inside the statue rendered it quite stuffy, which led to me donning an environmental suit with internal cooling. It wouldn't be ideal if my panting gave away that there was someone inside the statue; the icon of Nikonus was nearly double his actual height, and even had him holding a flamethrower. The Duerten had a sense of humor, I'd give them that. Whatever Coji passed along to her people, the statue had been constructed hastily and my plan was greenlit. The workmanship looked decent, in spite of the condensed time frame.

The Kolshians were receptive to the Homogeneity's offer to return to the fold, not knowing hidden venom was behind the talks. The Duerten had a better idea than my motion sensor; they'd disguised a camera into the base, placing other knobs around it to conceal it. I'd tested the escape door before we departed. There was just enough room for me to kneel, and spring out from a crouched position. I was also given a backup firearm, to avoid any technical issues.

The moment of truth came when Aafa's gunships greeted us above-world, scanning us with sensors. The masking technology obfuscated my signature enough, since the hidden compartment was painted with special materials that prevented light from passing through. I had peeked at my camera screen when the ship's crew disembarked, and the Duerten were shown inside the Federation hall under careful watch. The Kolshians had quadrupled the amount of guards on sight, with several looking down from newly-built watchtowers.

"What is this?" a Kolshian soldier demanded, as Ambassador Coji pushed the statue down a cargo ramp. I had needed to wedge myself between the walls to keep from sliding. "Shit, is that Nikonus? It's a striking likeness."

Coji flapped her wings in agreement. "Yes, it's a gift as part of our peace offering. We would appreciate if you could display it somewhere, and allow us to show it to your leader as part of our humble apology."

“Er, I’m sure there’s room for it in the garden, though it wasn’t authorized before—”

“Is this offering not good enough for the Commonwealth? Duerten artists didn’t do well enough? I thought we were here to reunite our peoples, not to be insulted and spat at!”

“Uh, routine protocol could certainly be waived if Nikonus deems fit. I meant no offense. We’ll place it out in the garden, and you can go right in to see the High Chief.”

“Very well. I expect the Federation to respect our contributions, in light of the impact we have to the war. We’ll follow your pal.”

I watched with bated breath, as Coji was escorted inside the hall. The Kolshians weren’t that trusting, giving it a lengthy scan that raised my hackles. One soldier rapped on Nikonus’ chest above, finally seeming content when it didn’t sound hollow. Thankfully, my compartment was tucked below the bulk of the statue. As cramped as it was, the Duerten made a wise decision to minimize the space taken up by me. It lowered my risk of detection, and limited the amount of off-putting cues that would be visible.

The statue was moved onto a large dolly, with several Kolshian soldiers exerting themselves to push it across the clean sidewalks. Blood hummed in my veins, as I fantasized about popping out now and shooting these grunts at point-blank range. With the hour of my plan in sight, the fear and doubts had evaporated; I was excited for the deliverance of sweet revenge, for me, for Marcel, and for every Venlil affected by the Federation. However, my wrath had to be saved for the one who deserved a summary execution.

I had plenty of time to think—hours without any stimuli, other than listening to guard chatter and surveying my surroundings. My life had gone downhill in a hurry; I ruined the only real friendship I ever had, and I erased my fear at the cost of my soul. The humans and I had no idea what we were awakening, from our shaky beginnings down this path. When Nikonus fell at my claws, if I was taken with him, two monsters would be killed. This was the only way to be free of the Federation’s tampering, once and for all.

Nikonus is the one at the helm of the war, who plans to forcibly cure and use humanity. He gave the orders, for Mileau and every other battle, and laughed about the centuries of torment for other races—he’ll do anything for power. He is pure evil, lacking respect for nature or any

other societies.

This would be my final act to protect humanity and Venlilkind. I could still hear despondent words in Marcel's voice, demanding an account for what I'd done, but I had the conviction to pep myself up. The Duerten saw the wisdom in my plan, so while Coji had called it deranged, there must be merit to why I was doing it. The galaxy would be a better place without Nikonus drawing breath. I repeated the mantra to myself, and ruminated on how good it had felt to execute the Kolshian scientist at Mileau. Hours replaying that moment worked me into a fervor.

Where is Coji? I thought to myself. *How long is that Duerten going to dawdle inside? She was supposed to bring Nikonus here; you think he'd want to see the stupid statue.*

Even fixating on my impulses wasn't enough to stave off boredom, stuck in an uncomfortable suit and a cramped space. As I was half-contemplating going on the prowl, seeking out the Chief, distant chatter finally hit my ears. It'd gone from daylight to an eerie dusk, with faint illumination falling on curated teusflowers from the sinking sun. Coji and Nikonus' voices floated behind me; the Duerten ambassador to humanity was the perfect figure to renounce Earth and make "amends." The duo were laughing like old buddies, seeming to mock Terrans. I doubted Coji had to fake a word she said.

"—was shocked to learn humans groom themselves," the Duerten was saying. "They trim those tiny patches of hair, paint their claws, and polish their canines. Predators dolling themselves up; it's hilarious!"

Nikonus clasped his tentacles behind his back. "In a predator's mind, they truly think they're sapient. We know better, of course… there might be a tiny bit of credence to higher cognition in humans, but it's minimal. Flesh-eating beasts figured out germ theory—unlike the Yotul."

"Well, it's fortunate those human monstrosities bathe, or they'd smell of blood and carcasses. Just to not smell more rancorous than they already do with that sweat—they're dripping in it! I've seen it pool under their armpits, and it's fucking gross. We never wanted to be friends with them."

Remind me why I shouldn't aim for Coji after Nikonus? The way she

talks about Terrans is disgusting. She's lucky we have the same enemy.

The Duerten was positioned out of reach of Nikonus, with guards keeping the duo apart. I grimaced when the Kolshian leader stopped a hearty distance from the statue, admiring it from afar. He inspected it for several seconds, before returning his focus to the avian. Curses flitted through my mind. I had thought that he'd view it from every angle, and be drawn in by his own towering image. It represented the power he wished to lord over others, as well as the fawning attention he craved.

"What do you think?" Coji prodded.

Nikonus started to turn away from it. "It's satisfactory, but I'm not sure it will help our image to keep this around."

"Are you joking? It's an expression of adoration from an independent party, who regrets their time outside the Federation—it's not like you built it. Please, humor me and appreciate the craftsmanship. Come close, look at the knobs on the base; they're carved with different flora from Aafa!"

The Duerten trotted forward without waiting for Nikonus' response, and I noticed the Kolshian leader curl his lip with a bit of irritation. He trailed after the avian, offering a cursory glance at a knob to appease her. The gray avian was stationed right in front of the camera, and the escape hatch, though she was struggling to coax Nikonus into position. I might have to go for a suboptimal ambush.

"Feel the quality materials, and the level of detail! I want you to appreciate it, Chief; give me some interest. We don't give gifts lightly. Worried the press are going to catch you?" Coji squawked.

Nikonus trudged up with reluctance, and the Duerten moved out of the way so he could take her place. The indigo skin containing his violet blood, and the bulbous, sickly-orange eyes harboring evil intent were right before me. This was the time to strike; given that Coji had been instrumental in luring the Kolshian to this spot, my anger toward her eased a bit. I ensured that my paws were ready on the gun, and wrapped my tail around the statue's release lever. With a single, unhesitating tug, the assassination attempt was set in motion.

After dreaming about this moment for hours, all that rushed through my mind now was Skalga and Earth: my two homes. I

thought about Jensi and her tears at my brother's funeral. Thanks to what I was about to do, she would be mourning her other son's death in no time. If Marcel truly still cared for me, he would be grief-stricken too. This choice of mine was going to hurt the people I loved, yet I still had the resolve to move forward. The door slid open, and I lunged toward the Kolshian that was mere feet away.

"What the—" Nikonus gasped out a few words, and alarm flashed in his eyes.

Before his guards could even draw their weapons, I'd gotten off several trigger pulls into his center of mass. Violet blood gushed from the wounds, but I made sure I kept pulling to ensure the job was done. The Kolshian leader crumpled to the ground, while Coji had taken to the skies in a hasty escape. I landed on all fours, shoving the barrel into his temple. Guards had drawn their weapons, and I could hear shots being fired toward me. Pain seared through my stomach, nearly blinding out all sensory input, but I managed to depress the trigger again

Brain matter spurted over my wrists, as another bullet struck me in the leg. My crooked limb gave way underneath me, and as I fell, more shots whizzed by where my head had been. Nikonus was splayed behind me, lying in a pool of his own blood, his bulging eyes cold and lifeless. I could tell from his vacant gaze that he was gone; I'd done what I set out to do. The wicked tyrant, the face of the empire that terrorized every world they came across, was dead.

I'm okay with being executed now. My sacrifice will be worth it, and bring humanity one step closer to demolishing the Federation.

I still clutched my gun, as I gasped in pain on the ground. Orange blood was dripping onto the grass, matting my stomach fur with sticky fluids. I managed to raise the weapon, and fire a shot at a guard. It clipped him in the shoulder, though the gash unfortunately didn't cripple him. More soldiers were rushing to the scene, focused on me from all directions. I tried to fire again, but my magazine came up empty, with my bullets spent on Nikonus. My agency was diminishing, as rapid blood loss threatened to send my system into shock.

"Cease fire! That's Slanek. TAKE HIM ALIVE!" a commander shouted.

Kolshians rushed to stand over me, and kept their guns pointed at

me. Medics checked on Nikonus first, finding him lacking a pulse; at an officer's order, they turned their focus to me. With my mission complete, I was ready to put an end to the thoughts that plagued me. I felt surprisingly calm about bleeding out in the hall's glamorous garden. Tentacles got to work packing my wounds and prepping me for transit. I clawed feebly toward their eyes, though my paw was swatted back with ease.

"Fuck…you," I spluttered.

My life flashed before my eyes, as I laid there staring up at the sky. There was a lot of blood; I could tell that without looking. I'd never planned on making it out alive, and clearly, Coji hadn't concerned herself with my escape either. I stopped fighting, and relaxed into the ancient force sinking its grip into me. A cold, involuntary wave tugged me down to unconsciousness, as I fell further away from all senses and thought.

—

Harsh light filtered into my eyes, as I slowly came to in a laboratory. It wasn't clear how long I'd been out, but I still felt disoriented. My wounds had been mended, and an IV was sticking into my arm; it could've been used for a blood transfusion. A sick feeling clasped my abdomen, realizing I was in Kolshian custody. Researchers were conferring with each other, clearly talking about me. Something in the air they exuded reminded me of that evil scientist Navarus.

The visuals in my periphery finally registered, as machinery I'd seen in the humans' anti-predator disease campaigns. This seemed like a facility, the reason Onso had cautioned me against touting my diseased mind. I tried to prompt my weak limbs to rise, but restraints strapped me to a table. The jangling sound alerted the Kolshians' to my wakefulness, and a doctor skipped over with delight. I gulped nervously, though my throat was lacking in saliva.

"Ah, you're awake! Now we can do our neurological scan, and determine the exact areas that trigger Venlil aggression." The doctor pressed a few buttons, and the cot I was laying on rolled down a conveyor into a machine. "Researcher's log: we are commencing our initial survey of the assassin. I anticipate few difficulties breaking this Venlil; he only spent a few months with the predators. Once re-education is complete, a docile Slanek will

be an excellent example to our allies of why gentling and curing are necessary practices."

My ears clamped flat with pure terror, listening to the hum of the machine. The Kolshians were scanning me to identify which parts of my brain they wanted to change, and then were likely to broadcast a "before and after" to demonstrate what an excellent job they'd done. I wasn't sure if the researcher had meant for me to overhear; perhaps he thought it wouldn't make a difference whether I knew his intent. What if they convinced me to detest humans, and go back to being meek prey? I didn't want that!

Regardless of what they did to me, I'd hold out for the memory of Marcel. I struggled against the restraints again, despite knowing it was useless. These monsters had me at their mercy, and given my role in Nikonus' gruesome death, I imagined my treatment would be less than kind. Every ounce of my brain wished I had bled out in that garden, and that the tale ended just as Frankenstein's monster had perished. There wasn't supposed to be anything after the assassination was complete! I had to find some way to get out of here.

The rest of my life suddenly seemed like an endless stretch of torment. I fell into a numb state of horror, realizing the unavoidable future in store for me. The personal sacrifices necessary to bring about Nikonus' demise were higher than I had ever expected. The Kolshians chuckled among themselves as they scanned the terrorized Venlil's brain for places to poke and prod. Hatred simmered in my veins, and I yearned to kill every last one of them.

Yet all the same, despite the burning rage that festered inside me, my deepest, all-consuming thought was that I missed my human.

[Memory stream terminates here. No further transcription data exists for this subject's neural signature.]

Chapter 141

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: February 21, 2137

Hunter was summoned to a UN base responsible for Archives prisoners, accessible by a short shuttle ride to an undisclosed location. Tyler had been working on interrogations on-site since our return to Earth, though the more I pressed, the more I got the feeling that claim wasn't representative of the truth. While my amber-eyed relic of the 1960s was finalizing the documents for his reintegration, I was determined to uncover what Officer Cardona, and possibly by extension, humanity, was hiding. Were the Terrans trying to convert the Farsul to our side, like they'd done with me?

I wouldn't neglect aiding the human primitive, who'd become dear to my heart in spite of his antiquated ways, but it didn't sit well that I was the only soldier from the Archives' mission kept in the dark. Hunter was napping against my shoulder, somehow acting harmless despite his beastly origins from lawless days. When I interacted with him, old behaviors resurfaced from when Hania, my daughter, was alive; I'd devoted myself to catching the human up on modern learning. It was my first real look at Earth, without any safeguards or restrictions, but we'd plunged into those depths together.

Hunter also needed a crash course on the wider galaxy; things that a child Hania's age would've known were new to him. However, when I passed along overviews of alien currencies and markets on a whim, I'd seen his eyes light up the way my daughter's had the first time she saw the ocean. Despite being a rural farm boy, the predator had an aptitude for the subject, soaking up complex ideas like a sponge. While basic science and simplistic technology confounded him, Hunter could identify trends and analyze data as well as a high-ranking Fissan or Nevok. If he wanted to adjust to the modern times, trading might be a perfect option.

"It's fascinating that the hypercapitalist races are run by their highest corporations and conglomerates," the ancient human had remarked. "Ruling purely on economic benefits seems unwise. I'm a laissez-faire guy, but you need some oversight. Entities can't be

trusted to police predatory behavior on their own!"

Of course a primitive human says that. I'd wanted to reply, though I kept it to myself. *If savage outliers could rise to power in your time, Hunter, I'm sure they saw economic exploits as another avenue to shirk all morals.*

Feeling my shoulder falling asleep, I tried to slip out from under Hunter's skull without waking him. However, without my weight to support him, the predator began to topple sideways. His binocular eyes jolted open, and he yawned in groggy confusion. Dipping my head in apologetic fashion, I tried to shake the pins and needles from my arm. It was crazy that I could see a creature that looked like this, and once likely ripped prey apart with those youthful hands, as my son.

"It lives!" I teased, swatting him on the knee with the blunt side of my claws. The human recoiled, surprised by the contact. "I thought you went back into cryosleep for a moment."

Hunter scrunched his nose. "I didn't mean to fall asleep on you, Sovlin."

"Nonsense, it's fine. You were adorable. We're almost here, so I've got to return some feeling to my arm."

"I'm not sure how I feel about being called 'adorable.'"

"Any other species would take the affectionate remark and roll with it. If someone told me a few months ago I'd be trying to convince a downer predator that life's worth living, letting one snooze on my shoulder, do you know what I would've said?"

"…that you want my entire species to suffer, and that you'd claw my eyes out? Also, I'm not a downer; there's just objectively nothing to live for. The future sucks."

"Well, it'll suck a little less every day. You gotta press on to find out if things get better, and you can't think the 'future' sucks across the board. You got me to wake you up, after all, and I'm one of the most-loved figures on Earth."

"I'm quite aware the opposite is true, Sovlin. I am grateful that you've stuck with me, even if you keep trying to throw away my cigarettes."

"The first time I saw you setting a stick on fire, and putting it in

your mouth, I thought you were attempting suicide by smoke inhalation. I still do! Why would even *predators* do something so stupid?! Tyler told you it's toxic and causes cancer."

"Not that it'd make a difference if it were true, but…name one reason I should take *Tyler's* word for anything."

"Fair point. That prim—Yotul, who didn't even know what aviation was as a kid, knows more than Tyler."

"Why is Onso not growing up with aviation relevant?"

"Because I said so, Hunter Ernest Garner."

"All three names. Ouch."

"Ouch is right. Now get up. Let's move to the cockpit before landing, huh? We should be prepared for whatever they're gonna ask you."

Hunter made a point of saluting, and I waved my claws dismissively at the predator. We ambled up to the cockpit, where Tyler was paying no mind to the automated transit shuttle. By regulation, someone who could pilot a craft was supposed to keep watch during takeoff and landing; that meant I needed to preside over the blond officer for the descent. The plane had begun to tilt downward, and the windshield granted a clear view of desolate treetops surrounding a roughshod installation. UN security on the ground looked like ants from this height.

"Sovlin called your buddy primitive again," Hunter snitched immediately.

I shook my head. "Damn you. It doesn't count toward the jar. I stopped myself."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "That Yotul was studying rocket science when he was 13, and knows more than you about pretty much everything. I'd bet a kidney that he'd smoke you on an IQ test."

"As if. Onso repeats things he hears and he reads. Word retention doesn't mean—"

Tyler's holopad buzzed in his lap, revealing an incoming call. The tall human grew serious at once, and he pressed a finger to his lips for silence. Hunter gawked at the video call, an awestruck expression taking over his features. I wasn't sure if such exchanges existed in his century, or if they'd been in monochrome over

computers the size of a building like he'd suggested before. It might've been more difficult to resist scoffing at him, had I not seen the face on the other end of the call. *Marcel.*

The red-haired human was inconsolable, weeping through puffy eyes and red-rimmed irises. A box of tissues was just in view of the camera, with several wadded up on the desk. His posture looked utterly defeated and distraught, while his grooming was in shambles; it was clear he'd lost weight in the aftermath of the cure. Marcel wasn't quite as gaunt as when I'd held him captive, without any food, but he didn't look like a healthy predator. This certainly wasn't the put-together man who forgave me after Sillis.

I always feel guilty, just for interacting with him. Should I stay out of the picture? No, I can't, I have to oversee the shuttle's landing.

"Tyler." Marcel's voice was choked with mucus, sounding ragged and shaky. "Oh God! How could this happen to Slanek? I should've stopped him, and now he's gone, and I don't know if he's dead or… there's nothing—"

Tyler narrowed his eyes. "Hey, slow down. Breathe, buddy. Tell me, in plain English, what happened to Slanek."

"You…you haven't heard?"

"Why would I know what happened to your exchange pal?"

"The news. He shot Nikonus. The Duerten snuck him to Aafa…the Kolshians made a video about what happens to herbivores who are around predators but it's—"

"Are you having a mental break? Slanek, the skittish and emotional Venlil who couldn't fight in a flight sim."

"I *wish* I'd lost it! Slanek's gone, his mom's begging me to know what happened, which I don't fucking know, and the last thing I said to him…"

The red-haired human returned to full-fledged sobbing, and buried his face in his hands. While our shuttle touched down on a landing strip, I punched the name Slanek into my holopad; multiple headlines announced Nikonus' death, and UN intelligence was on record verifying that Marcel's friend was the assassin. I found that difficult to believe, even after seeing how bitter and angry the Venlil had been toward me. He'd tried to kill me while Arxur breathed down both our necks, so I knew he was neither

levelheaded nor pragmatic. Still, the magnitude of what the Venlil had done was enormous.

“Marcel?” Hunter whispered. “This is the guy you tortured? And who’s Nikonus?”

I ignored the ancient beast’s question, and tapped Tyler on the shoulder. “It’s true…what Marcel says about Slanek. None of the articles are certain whether he’s alive, but the fact that the Kolshians haven’t announced his death…”

“Means they have something else in store for him!” Marcel bawled. “I can’t do anything to stop it, or protect him. He said he was getting help. He lied to me, again! He’s probably being tortured, just like…me. Like I was.”

Tyler pursed his lips. “We don’t know that.”

“Don’t patronize me! We both know I’m right. I need you to help me; there’s no chance the UN’ll let me serve again, but I can’t just let the Kolshians keep him. Tell me how I put myself on a warship to Aafa. I have to do something!”

“No, you don’t. You’ve done *more* than enough, and it should be obvious to you that you’re not fit for combat. Forget the mental aspect; how would you ever integrate with a human unit, with such severe allergic reactions from traces of animal protein? It’s not your fault, and you need to sit this one the fuck out.”

“I can’t go on like this. Nothing good ever happens to me, and everyone I ever cared about…there’s nothing but hate and suffering! I try so hard to be moral, and kind, and the fucking universe just pisses all over me! I’m done. I’m ready to die by a gun, one way or another, so if you’re really my friend, put me on a goddamn shuttle!”

“Listen to yourself. You’re irrational, man. Slanek clearly had his own issues, but I know he wouldn’t want this; he loved you. Maybe a little too much. I’m going to help you, but you have to be strong and *be here* for when we find him. For his family, for Nulia. Things will get better, and you’re a good person who can bring a lot of positivity to this world.”

“Marcel, it breaks my heart to see you this despondent. If I deserve to be happy, so do you,” I interjected. “I can’t imagine your trauma and your pain, but you shouldn’t give up! This is *my* fault, not

yours; it starts and ends with me."

Marcel heaved a tired sigh. "I don't care whose fault it is. I just want it to stop."

"We're working on it!" Tyler's blue eyes shone with as much sincerity I'd seen from him; his concern for his friend was apparent. "I know you're wondering how I can possibly help you, but you called me because you trust me. You trust me, right?"

"Yes…but I have no one else to call."

"So I was your first choice; I'm flattered. Listen, I'm gonna make sure you get to help out. I'll get in touch with the UN, some way, and see that you're put on something like reports. It all makes a difference toward bringing Slanek home. Second, I'll ask to go to Aafa, in your place, and do anything I can to bring down these fuckers, at the very least."

"Tyler, I can't ask you to do that. You have some sort of cozy detail…"

"Us crayon eaters make our own decisions. You're worth it to me; I want Marcel Fraser in this world. But if I'm doing this, you better uphold your end of the bargain and carry on. Remember how happy you were learning about aliens? You're gonna treat your time abroad like an exchange program adventure, and they'll find a cure before you know it. You hear me?"

"Uh-huh. Yeah."

"Good. Buddy, we landed a few minutes ago, and I don't want the boys in blue barging in, floating phrases like 'dereliction of duty.' I've got to uh, interrogate some, uh, guests."

Marcel chuckled, in spite of himself. "You're not qualified to interrogate a Barbie doll! What are you really—"

Tyler coughed, flicking his pupils in my direction. *What the fuck? I knew he was hiding something from me about his work here!*

"Ahem, got it. Good luck with your interrogations, buddy," the redhead pivoted.

Officer Cardona grinned. "I love you, man. I'll be in touch as soon as I can, and believe me, I'm on this."

"Thank you…truly. Don't worry, I won't do anything rash. I'll talk to you in a bit…I'm gonna go lay down."

The red-haired human disconnected from the call, and Tyler cleaned his misty eyes. It was moving to see how much the two predators cared for each other as friends; however, other thoughts warred for my attention. Marcel's skepticism of the real happenings at this base fueled my own suspicion, prompting me to find a way to snoop around once we got inside. I helped Tyler straighten his uniform, shifting between concern for my former captives and nosiness toward this current operation.

"Tyler? I know we go where they tell us, but I'd like to throw my name in with your request," I murmured. "I owe it to Marcel…and his Venlil. Slanek might not have done this if he'd been allowed to take his frustrations out on me, or if I hadn't sparked his anger to begin with."

Hunter raised his eyebrows. "What?! But…I need you here! You promised to help me navigate the world, Sovlin. I can't do this alone…you're all I have."

"I'll still be in touch, here for you at the press of a button, but I'm responsible for Slanek going off the deep end. It's not right for me to live while Marcel throws in the towel. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to do something. Please, Tyler?"

The tall human sighed. "You did enough for Marcel on Sillis, but I know you'll never believe that, so I'll forward your request. Onso will want to come with me, and it won't be a negotiation. If Sam and Carlos want to join, you better find out by this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"That's settled then. Let me walk you and Hunter to the lobby for your Q&A, and we'll sort out the rest later. I've got to get to my post."

I wrapped an arm around Hunter's torso, trying to reassure him of my commitment to his welfare. As determined as I was to motivate Marcel to persist, this reawakened predator from the Archives was beginning to feel like my son; I had to ensure they both sought continued existence. It was dubious how successful I was at deciphering Earth's ways, but I'd tried to set my primitive Terran up for success and fulfillment. He needed my guidance. No matter how far away I was, I would deign to be in touch daily if at all possible.

"Would you object to me, um, mentally adopting you?" I whispered

to Hunter.

The primate scratched the brown hair on his scalp. “No.”

“Good. Now if only I could change your name. Are you sure I can’t call you Ernest?”

“No. That was Pa’s name. I ain’t my Pa, and I don’t wanna think about him none.”

Tyler escorted the two of us through the premises, down a walkway to an unassuming complex. UN guards were patrolling and posted at various entrances; despite its remote location on their own planet, the humans hadn’t relaxed security at this base. The predators were notably paranoid of attacks, anywhere and any place, but I thought it’d be wiser to concentrate security inside with the prisoners. That was unless the notion of Archives inmates was misdirection, just like the fabricated interrogations.

Maybe Hunter is privy to some information I’m not; he could’ve overheard something Tyler revealed without me present. Since this beast is my kind-of son now, he’s going to help me solve the puzzle.

I pushed the issues with Slanek to the back of my mind, knowing that I’d already committed to do what I could. Dwelling on the Venlil’s crazed—yet successful—assassination would only provide a disservice to Hunter, and it would distract me from assessing the situation here. Why would the predators alter the facts about their activities with me, when I’d proven my loyalty and discretion? I’d been willing to do everything the United Nations asked, without questions or hesitation. It was ridiculous that the primates would keep me out of the loop now.

“Here we are.” Tyler ushered us into a lobby area, and spoke a few words to a receptionist. He turned back to us with a taut smile, scanning his card to unlock a secured door. “You’ll do great, Hunter. I’ll be there to take you both home—ramen tonight.”

“Again?” Hunter groaned.

“Blame Sovlin and his stupid meat allergies. If you don’t like it, cook for yourselves.”

The blond human vanished down the corridor, and the receptionist informed us that UN personnel would be with us shortly. I waited several seconds to ensure Tyler was gone, and scoped out the area. A keycard was visible on the desk, which was likely able to unlock

the sealed door. However, there was no way for me to snatch it, since it was in the direct line of her binocular vision.

I nudged Hunter, whispering in his ear. “Distract her. Make a scene.”

“Why?” he hissed.

“Because Tyler’s not a good liar, and I’m tired of pretending he is. Do it.”

“Yes, *Dad*.”

The brown-haired human stuck his tongue out at me, before sauntering up to the desk in exaggerated fashion. He tried to peek at the computer display, but she turned it away from him. Hunter made a pouting face, before removing his shoe from his foot. I gasped when he chucked it just over her head; the poor stranger seemed shocked as well. She rose quickly, approaching the ancient human to subdue him. I slunk around the corners of her vision, and swiped her card as she shouted at the primitive to calm down.

Jackpot. I unlocked the sealed door, only to find two human guards standing a few paces away inside. Gulping, I tried to think quickly; acting like I belonged here would be easier than shoving my way through, blind to where I needed to go. My posture straightened with false confidence, and I prayed my remaining spines didn’t bristle and reveal my nerves.

“I have an urgent message for Officer Tyler Cardona. Captain Monahan asked that I pass it along for his eyes only,” I said, trying not to waver under their scrutinizing binocular eyes. “You can verify with her, if you want to waste everyone’s time and land yourself on a starship captain’s shitlist. Either way, I must speak with Officer Cardona at once.”

The guards, both young soldiers who seemed inexperienced, shared a glance, before one beckoned for me to follow them. The threat of being rebuked by a superior officer was menacing, and to their eyes, it was unlikely I’d accessed the facility at all without proper clearance. If I tried anything or was found to be lying, they could always restrain me. I followed the humans down a short hallway, retreading the ground Tyler had walked on. My heart was pounding in my throat from this act of deception, though I was also nervous to discover what the humans were concealing.

The UN soldiers hesitated, before one rapped his knuckles on a thick metal door. I drew a deep breath as Tyler popped it open, granting me a peek of what was inside the cell. There were no Farsul occupants, nor were there any rescued herbivores being purposefully hidden from their people. Instead, I could see comfortable accommodations designed for an unrestrained Arxur, which had its monstrous eyes turned toward the door. The blond human seemed alarmed to see me, but I wasn't paying his incensed words any attention.

Why would the Terrans have a gray in custody, kept under the guise of the Archives? My heart rate climbed even higher, and with rage churning my blood, I struggled to consider what this meant. All I wanted was to have the sadistic predator slain at my claws, for the torment its kind inflicted upon my family.

Chapter 142

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: February 21, 2137

When the United Nations contacted me after the Summit, I expected to be chastised for my unannounced arrival, shirking Olek and Lisa's watch. Instead, Secretary-General Zhao offered to confide the secret he was keeping about the Arxur; the human was emphatic that this had to be kept under wraps, even from Felra, Kaisal, and anyone else in my inner circle. I landed a shuttle on the gorgeous world known as Earth, following the UN's landing beacon. It was a bit concerning to know the humans were officially in league with the herbivores, while we remained outside their organization. It wasn't clear if the speech the rodent pestered me into had made a difference, given that I hadn't heard from any governments except the Yotul. Tarva was notably quiet.

Human soldiers steered me in through a separate entrance from the main one, though I found their cordial demeanors reassuring. It wasn't clear what the Secretary-General felt needed to be passed along in person; I hoped the request for a face-to-face dialogue meant I was in the United Nations' good graces. My Dossur friend's most compelling argument for attending the Summit had been that an effective rebellion required external military support. Our success hinged on how much the Terrans or their allies chipped in to our cause. While it didn't suit me to beg like a leaf-licker, I would attempt to gauge their war plans.

Do humans view us as full allies? Unless they're crushing Aafa underfoot tomorrow, this revolution needs to be more than an afterthought.

"What could be a lock-and-key secret about the Arxur from the Archives?" I mused to my escorts, who only acknowledged my words with a twitch of their binocular eyes. "We already know the truth about the conspiracy, yes?"

The humans clearly had been ordered to stay tight-lipped about the purpose of this visit, so I fiddled with my holopad while waiting for Zhao. The Secretary-General strolled into the room within minutes, which suggested he'd been here in anticipation of my arrival; it was

another positive sign that the leader of Earth respected my time. His personal guards were lax, further denoting that he no longer viewed me as a threat. The Terran dignitary extended his right arm, and I gripped it loosely in my own paw. A slight smile crossed his face, before he seated himself across from me.

“I’m not here to put you through the ringer, since the Duerten were no major loss. If I’m being honest, there were lots of groans among the diplomatic staff when we heard they were coming,” Zhao chuckled. “But frankly, Isif, it wasn’t a smart move on your part. You know how delicate it is, just for us to appease the herbivores. Felra seems to have a negative impact on your decision-making, while also failing to maintain decorum…and making you appear weak to your kin. She’s been good for you personally, but she’s a negative influence on your judgment. She needs to go home.”

I flared my nostrils with indignation. “I’m not going to ship my best friend back to Mileau, gift-wrapped for the Kolshian occupiers! It was your people’s idea to guilt me into rescuing her.”

“General Jones…miscalculated, in my humble opinion. Her intent was for you to tilt the scales at Mileau, not to grab one Dossur and bolt. You’re a great strategist, and you did need a push, but you’ve become distracted. You’re not devoting your full energy to the movement. That’ll cost you in the long run.”

“I saved someone that is important to me. Jones wished to force me into openly rebelling, yes? Humanity has made no progress at Mileau in months, so it seems bold to fling accusations at me for my selected engagements.”

“You’re correct to frown upon our progress, or lack thereof. The problem with Mileau is we whittle down each other’s drone forces, and the Kolshians send more to replace them, as quickly as us. It’s become a competition of how fast we can slap new automatons together, and they have the advantage of being entrenched in the system already. If we commit resources from other key areas, that opens us up to an attack elsewhere. Perhaps what they’re banking on.”

“So humanity is more focused on keeping its current systems and counterattacking.”

“Precisely. Every system we fail to protect reflects on us. The Duerten Shield has been ineffectual. The whole of our industrial

power can't go to one world. You need to intervene, whether for Felra's sake or for ours; give us an edge to make headway."

It was undeniable that the Dossur didn't belong among Arxur. Her presence *was* hampering my interactions with the rebels serving under me, many of whom would never accept her. Felra never complained about her homeworld being occupied, but I'd noticed how happy she'd looked at the sight of Dossur Summit delegates. I'd grown accustomed to having a friend to talk to; however, what was best for her was more important than her commitment, preventing me from being alone. No matter the distance, we could chat via SwiftPair like we'd done before meeting up.

Humans manipulated me into intervening at Mileau when the attack first began, but at least Zhao has the decency to outright ask without trickery. Felra's behavior has forced me into some altercations to defend her honor. It's truly not ideal.

"I'll consider it, but we've lent our resources to rescue various cattle, for nothing in return. I can't risk sustaining heavy losses without some guarantees and recompense," I responded. "Spell out for me what comes next. Convince me that your cunning is truly enough to topple the Federation, once and for all."

Zhao donned a cocky smirk. "The Farsul are already out of commission."

"You and I both know they're not the military might of the empire. They're schemers, meddlers, rewriters. The Kolshians are the ones with the secret army, and we have no idea of their full capabilities, but Aafa could be an impregnable fortress."

"They could well have an ace up their sleeve to play, but who said all *our* cards were on the table? There's three phases left in the war. The first is defense; should the tables turn at Mileau, I imagine the Kolshians are biding their time to hit human territory. We know they want to cure us, so I'd find the use of biological weapons against a civilian populace likely."

"Have you made any progress toward undoing this cure? It would be of use to the Arxur, as this disease would be lethal against us."

"Even with emergency use protocols, I can't see us having a genetic reversal inside of a year—especially with the life-or-death issues on our plate. We've been looking into this since learning about the

omnivore manipulation from the late Nikonus, but knowing which human genes were targeted by the retrovirus, via a before-and-after, is insightful. It should accelerate our research progress a little."

"At least your kind can survive on vegetation, yes? I should hope your other two war 'phases' aren't so dreadfully passive; it inspires minimal confidence."

"No, Isif, we're not content to sit back. The second phase is preventing the Kolshians' allies from joining the fray, since it's unfeasible to clash with hundreds of species. We keep them out of it, hitting any targets we can, and make it a fair fight. The third part then, of course, is an all-out assault on Aafa, and we take it inch-by-inch; we storm the planetary defense systems on their satellite like the landing at Normandy. Humanity must execute each of these phases simultaneously, and to perfection."

"You can't be everywhere all at once."

"But we can make them *think* we are."

Realization struck me like a kick to the teeth; that was the strategy humanity wanted my rebellion to employ against the Dominion. It was an arduous illusion to pull off, but the psychological effects couldn't be understated. Leaving the enemy looking over their shoulder, expecting an ambush at each turn, was the classic strategy of the Arxur. Could the Terrans rattle the herbivores further than we had, with a more convincing rendition? I was intrigued to know how Zhao hoped to accomplish that, and whether I could replicate those strategies against Giznel.

We've discussed the state of military affairs long enough; I'm sold that the humans are planning an attempt to stamp out the last of the Feds, in one grand push. Even the tireless Terrans can't keep up this pace of activity forever…can they?

"I'll draft a plan to retake Mileau, but again, I expect some collaboration and aid," I decided. "Now, I thought you summoned me here to impart something you found at the Archives. Or was that a false pretense?"

Secretary-General Zhao pursed his lips. "I decided to tell you the truth, because I trust you and see you as an important ally. At the Archives, we discovered a handful of Arxur kept in cryosleep, presumably preserved from long ago, in case the Farsul ever took

another go at curing you."

"What?! That's…incredible. I would love for these Arxur to join me."

"That's part of why I hesitated to tell you. You see, after learning about what the Arxur once were, many of them have become despondent. I feel like we're treading the same path as the Farsul, too, telling your people that aliens kidnapped them, but not us. Except it's true, in this case."

"I don't follow. Knowing my own sadness to what we've lost as a culture, I do not see why humanity's role or their reaction to the present status quo would matter."

"Isif, Earth providing asylum to vocal critics of Betterment, several of whom opposed that very ideology in their day, would destroy what's left of our outward neutrality with the Dominion. If word got out through your people, or we accepted the scattered pleas from this lot to join UN forces, it would be problematic. Regardless, I'm not sure they want to sign on to your rebellion. They're leery, even of you, learning about the cruel practices and your history."

Disappointment fogged my mind. "Ah, I see. My own people think I am a monster. You don't want me to get the wrong idea about their allegiance, or spread the word about what Arxur used to be."

"I felt it would be wrong to deprive you of the opportunity to speak with the ancients. I know you want to restore your society to what it once was, and that mandates full knowledge of the changes that have transpired."

"If humanity has assessed that these people wish for nothing to do with me, I would respect that conclusion. After the ridicule at the Summit, I do not need to speak to anyone who does not wish to speak to me."

"Relax. I've selected one of the Arxur who's taken the news in stride, and hasn't had a depressive episode. Her name is Vysith; she was open to speaking with you, if only to find out how you could do such things."

"Why would I wish to defend my entire life, Zhao? It is not as if I don't already know the full scope of my crimes."

"You want a reason to go through the trouble? One word: morality. Call it a foolish notion, but heeding moral principles is what gives

you integrity. Without ethics, your movement is one bad actor away from returning to Betterment's oppression. Vysith could show you what the Arxur stood for."

I lashed my tail in frustration. When word from the Archives confirmed empathy was prevalent in our past, I'd yearned to see it in action. After years of repressing my own defective leanings, it was difficult to understand how personal expression and interactions worked. Furthermore, I found myself defaulting to cruelty as the disciplinary crux that kept my subordinates in line. As much as I aspired to emulate the ideals of the past, I was at a loss for how to achieve that. Vysith could give me pointers on the proper bounds of morality.

Maybe we could become more like humanity, through this conversation Zhao is facilitating. It's worth hearing what Vysith has to say.

"Very well." I leveled the human with a piercing stare, which he matched with his own brown eyes. "If it helps return to the reason and honor that once guided us, I must do it. Peace for Arxur of the future—for every species among the stars—is what I desire, at any cost."

Secretary-General Zhao stood, beckoning for me to follow. "Humanity has that in common, Isif. Meier talked about coexistence, and I championed protecting Earth, but it goes beyond both of those noble goals. If we vanished from the Milky Way tomorrow…I'd like for people to say we left the galaxy a better place than we found it."

"I know they will not say that about me. I have perpetrated too much tragedy."

"For what it's worth, it's my belief that history will be kinder to you than you imagine."

The primate led me through a narrow corridor, which was cramped for my wider, taller form; had I not been slouching, I would not fit upright within the dreary hallway. Arxur posture proved beneficial in this instance, as we ducked into an observation room that opened through Zhao's retinal scan. I stalked up to the window, curious for a peek at Vysith. The female Arxur was seated across from a blond human, who was playing some paper rectangle game with her. The glass was one-way, while security monitors also captured the scene.

Zhao approached a microphone, switching it on. “Testing. Vysith, can you hear me? Are you ready to talk to the rebel leader I told you about?”

“Yes,” the huntress answered. “In the interest of parity, I think we should trade questions. This…Isif figure can start.”

Swallowing with nervousness, I took Zhao’s spot by the intercom. “It’s a pleasure to speak with you. May I ask whether you were around during the fourth world war?”

“I was more than around. I could’ve gone into politics, run for a small local office, but I served my country’s military to oppose the genocidal maniacs that wanted to conquer the world and ‘cull’ their own. My turn. If Betterment culled the good people, how could someone like you even exist?”

“Blending in. You can’t fully erase defectiveness…their word…from the gene pool. Assuming you have empathetic traits, which I gather from your speech, you would be put down today; rest assured, I do not engage in such practices.”

“Yes, how reassuring, that you felt the need to specify that. I don’t get how the Bloc could’ve gotten away with killing people, without an uproar from friends and family. Nobody fought back?”

“Uproar…you had friends and family who cared about you? Normal Arxur did?!”

“Is that really your question?”

“If I posited it to you in the interrogative, I suppose it is. By that logic, you asking why nobody fought back was an extraneous question.”

“I’m astounded by how rigid and literal you are. I was expressing my shock that you people just let Wriss rot. Even less social Arxur cared about their families, and had a few people to share their subjects of interest with. It seems impossible to have a functioning society without any connection; it’s no wonder you have no conscience.”

With how self-conscious I was speaking to others, the criticism of my phraseology would’ve been enough to make me clam up, *before* Vysith lambasted me as devoid of empathy. My conscience was why I shied away from talking food to begin with. Despite my efforts to oppose Betterment, this huntress viewed me with unfettered

hostility. It was difficult enough that the rest of the galaxy saw us as irredeemable monsters; to hear such rhetoric from my own kind needled shame deep within me.

Secretary-General Zhao knitted his brows with concern, and seemed to weigh terminating the exchange. I was surprised when the human placed an oily palm on my shoulder, a quiet gesture of support. Vysith's verbal attacks drew disappointment from Earth's leader, who'd hoped she would serve as a moral lighthouse to guide me through murky waters. I stepped away from the microphone, to deliberate a better angle to approach the investigation. The human dignitary started back down the corridor, sighing heavily.

A knock sounded from within Vysith's room, coming from a separate entrance to her chamber. The blond Terran accompanying the Arxur leapt to his feet with a baffled expression, and propped the door open. My deflated demeanor was replaced by curiosity, prompting me to squint. The face on the other side of the threshold was Gojid, belonging to an individual the humans clearly weren't expecting; the primates displayed concern at the newcomer's arrival. If my fellow predators were worried, that could mean the herbivore was a threat to Vysith's welfare.

I gazed upon the hate-filled eyes of the Gojid, and waited to see what his next move would be. It was clear the humans didn't think this spiky visitor had come with peaceful intentions.

Chapter 143

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: February 21, 2137

Tyler attempted to slam the door in my face, but I drove my shoulder into it with force that could only stem from passion. The memories of stabbing my claws into an Arxur's neck on Sillis, while trying to save Marcel, were fresh; everything that had gone wrong in my life started and ended with the grays. The reason I tortured the kind-hearted human was because I equated Earth's sapient predators with these child-eating, reptilian abominations. My daughter's screams, as she was eaten alive, echoed in my ears, and uncontrollable hatred blacked out any judgment.

"What the fuck are you doing here? You're only authorized to accompany Hunter!" Tyler exclaimed.

The blond human made a move to intercept me, but I ducked under his grasp. The Arxur at the table hadn't reacted to defend itself, and it looked more alarmed than ferocious. I could see Terran playing cards on the table in front of it; how could Tyler, my friend, have been indulging in a game with these savages? The two primates who were duped into bringing me here drew their weapons, though Officer Cardona urged them to stand down. Just as I came within striking distance of the gray, shadows flashed in my periphery.

A massive, scarred Arxur tackled me away from the one at the table, a growl rumbling in its throat. It had the clear opportunity for the death blow, but it had purposefully not driven its claws into my flesh. Rather than pinning me with its superior weight, it released its grip and gestured for me to stand. The beast's body tilted forward, arms raised in a fighting stance; it baffled me why it hadn't used its fangs to draw my blood. Was it toying with the prey that wandered into its den?

"Stand down, humans," the Arxur barked. "I can handle myself. Captain Sovlin, we have not met before, yes? I am the one you want, not Vysith. She was born long before any of the war atrocities happened."

An ajar door informed me that this newcomer predator had burst in

from an observation room, where a recognizable human face was watching the scene unfold. It was the Secretary-General of the United Nations himself, giving a filthy monster a tour fresh off the Summit! Zhao looked silently livid, striding into the room in a hurried attempt to defuse the situation. The name the Terran referred to the gray demon as was Isif, which rang a bell. The primates were consorting with the Chief Hunter that terrorized Gojids, forgetting all of its sins because it saved Earth?

This ugly bastard is directly responsible for Hania's fate. I'm going to rend it from limb-to-limb; it underestimates just how much I want it dead.

Vysith stood from the table, lashing its tail. "Why don't we talk about whatever the issue is? It's dishonorable to trade claws without provocation. Besides, I would love a chance to speak with an alien other than—"

"The leaf-lickers do not see you as worth talking to. We're monsters that deserve death to them," Isif hissed.

"With what the Arxur have become now, I can understand where they're coming from. I never would've imagined we'd…eat and torture people."

"That's something that's burdened me my entire life. Why do you think I'm letting Sovlin have a swing at me? I do not need outside assistance, which would make me look weak. Go on, Gojid, do your worst."

My bones ached from the force of its tackle, but I stood with renewed determination. This Arxur was mocking me, assuming I couldn't scratch it; the Terrans were foolish if they bought this mechanical, staged profession of guilt from the monster that led the raids. I shrieked, swiping straight at Isif's eyes. Its tail hooked around my legs, while I was mid-swing, and sent me crashing to my rump. It waited with patience, heartless eyes facing me as cold slits. My spines bristled, sickened by the predatory visage.

Isif seemed to be treating this skirmish as recreation; the glint in its eyes reminding me of how Tyler looked, playing his murderous video games. In my youth, my movements might've been a bit more spry, but my ankles were throbbing from the tail swipe. I could acknowledge that the monster had a grasp on its hunger, enough to calculate and wait rather than act in a frenzy. That necessitated a

more measured response on my part, despite the fog of fury spurring me onward.

“Lost your nerve already?” the Chief Hunter prompted.

I raised my claws in defiance. “Bloodthirsty, rotten, *unfeeling* fiend! I want you dead, dead as the fucking children you ate alive. You… STOLE MY FAMILY!”

Creeping forward with purposeful steps, I kept all of the Arxur’s offensive weapons in my peripheral vision. It had to keep its repulsive pupils focused on me, which made it obvious where it was looking. When its gaze flicked downward, I hopped over the blistering tail sweep that followed. The gray balanced itself, swinging an arm at my head; I landed just in time to duck, and pop back up to swipe its snout. Crimson red blood, the same iron-rich color as the humans, spurted from its nostrils. The UN soldiers looked ready to intervene, treacherously worried when I drew the gray’s blood.

“Stop attacking Isif at once! That’s an order, Sovlin,” Zhao growled, his own brown eyes narrowed in predatory fashion.

I darted out of Isif’s range, daring him to come to me. “Fuck you. The grays are animals…existential threats.”

“This is why you weren’t supposed to know any of this!” Tyler shouted. “You can’t control yourself or be trusted with any info involving the Arxur. The Federation started all of this; we can prove they weren’t always like this.”

“I don’t care! You have never understood how they deserve to *writhe*! Their words, their past, their supposed change of heart—it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t fucking matter.”

Isif bared its savage fangs, instruments of death which evolved for the sole purpose of dissecting sinew and crunching bone. The monster pounced toward me, jaws wide open. The terror of being eaten made me slow to react, disgusted by the carnivore’s gaping maw revealing the accrual of filthy drool. Its teeth were impossibly sharp, digging into my throat with painful force. The gray was applying the maximum pressure it could without puncturing my vulnerable flesh. It relaxed its grip for a moment, long enough to throw me into a pin on the ground. Its fangs were then back at my throat, bringing my prey instincts to full-fledged panic.

The last of my control poured into not flailing, which would risk Isif piercing my neck. The chemical surge was a blinding hysteria; sensory input was nauseating, with the reeking predator grasping me within its fangs like a meal. I didn't want to die the way my daughter had, dissected in slow fashion to savor the cruelty! The Arxur were evil creatures incapable of containing their hunger, and this moment proved it. Despite all of this, the idle humans were watching, as if they thought the scene was within acceptable limits of behavior! Perhaps they were scared to interfere with a gray's catch…or perhaps I was wrong to trust their benevolence.

Wasn't I always worried about Terrans siding with the Arxur over us? Was all the secrecy because they're throwing us to the grays, colluding with Isif above creatures with any redeeming features?

Isif placed an uncanny eye inches away from one of mine. "I do not want to hurt you. If I did, we would not be having this conversation. Are you understanding my words yet? An Arxur knows when they've been bested…when to admit defeat."

"Kill me, you fucking m-monster." A stutter lapsed into my voice from the dizzying pull of adrenaline, but I clung to my hatred in the face of certain death. "Savor the act, like the predator you are."

"It can feel good to engage in acts of aggression, but I derive no pleasure from needless suffering. Survival is not a choice; it's an imperative commanded by biology outside our control. The societal confines under the Dominion mandated horrible actions. Evil is not natural…it is gradual, hardened by time and birthed of ideas. It is a phenomenon of sapience, not predation."

"Only predators eat *people*. You l-lost the right to call yourself sapient with the first child's carcass you munched on."

"I…am sorry for every meal I've ever had. I had no choice, so while objective fault cannot be assigned in such circumstances, my conscience assigns guilt all the same. It is unforgivable."

"That's why you must die, scum."

"Were I not vital to the efforts for a peaceful future, I would agree with your assessment. By your own words about the right to be deemed sapient, Vysith has not lost her status—she never ate any creature with sophonce in her life. She was rescued from the Archives, and her people might as well have been a different

species. They welcomed you…as the humans would have, and like humanity, their civilians were killed for it. Direct your anger at me."

The Arxur, for an unfathomable reason, opened its jaws, and allowed me to crawl away on the floor. Why would it spare defenseless prey, when it could literally taste my flesh on its tongue? Perhaps it was deceiving the humans, who clearly trusted it enough to let it place its gross, chipped fangs on my throat. It had more control than I'd anticipated from a vile gray, but I didn't buy for one second that their species was different in the past. The Federation brought out a viciousness that was their existing inclination; no worthwhile race could've hunted other civilizations like they had.

The UN soldiers bound my wrists, as though I were the criminal; Tyler and Zhao both stared at *me* with disapproval. While I had disobeyed direct orders and trespassed, it'd proven that their secret actions were reprehensible. It was tough to believe they'd pulled Vysith from a cryopod, and deemed it ethical to keep the ancient Arxur out of my purview. I risked my life on that mission to help the Earthlings; I had the same right to know as anyone else! The humans crafted too many excuses for the grays' behavior, and their continued cooperation with these tormentors was unacceptable.

Tyler breathed a flustered sigh. "I was s'posed to keep Vysith company, Sovlin. She's a guest, and she's not dangerous. You can't be questioning our judgment, and poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"I'm tired of you treating the Arxur like genuine people!" I spat. "They're not."

"You know what? Either you sit and talk to Vysith like an adult, or I'll have you charged for insubordination! Your pick."

"As if I'd ever care what a gray has to say. My decision is self-evident."

Zhao tapped his chin. "Do you think the Arxur are evil?"

"Of course I do! You humans can't even say that word."

"What the Dominion have done *is* evil, but that's why they're sapient. It takes intention and knowledge to be malicious…animals just exist, unbeholden to our morality. The capacity for good and

evil are adjacent to one another."

"Oh, I get it: you think you see yourselves in them. They are *way* different. Humans might've had savage outliers in your past, but it wasn't your whole fucking society!"

"That's the problem with outliers. Left unchecked, you realize one day that they've become your whole society, in plain sight."

I opened my mouth to argue, but my treacherous thoughts turned to how easily the Federation ensnared countless societies in its web of lies; our entire society was disingenuous, and the loudest voices all had called to slaughter the peace-seeking humans. Secretary-General Zhao's words boasted the conviction of truthfulness, and Carlos' old lesson from the Battle of Sillis rang in my ears. "*That's the belief that makes monsters of us all. Nobody has empathy for someone that is too unalike.*" When the dots connected before my eyes, that the Arxur had en masse been convinced that aliens weren't people, I couldn't deny that it fit with true evil.

The humans viewed the grays' trajectory as a knowing, purposeful decline into depravity. Where I wanted to find a monster beyond comparison, I saw the Federation mirrored. Both parties were to blame for what happened to my family, and for that, they were irredeemable. I hated that I'd served for years beneath the Federation's banner, fighting for their causes, as much as I loathed the carnivorous creatures in this cell. Perhaps the Arxur were once capable of a slight semblance of civilization, since their decline had to start from something that wasn't this abominable. The Kolshians contacted those demons as sapients, and by Nikonus' own admission, starved them soon after.

Maybe Vysith is capable of restraining her bloodthirsty instincts—because unlike the humans, Arxur certainly possess those. Isif was drooling, and the brutality in the grays' mess hall on that cattle ship…

Zhao pointed a hand to the table. "We want peace. Make your choice: be a part of that vision, or refuse and help the Federation and the Dominion keep us in this cycle of death."

Tyler seemed surprised, as I gave the ultimatum genuine consideration. The ancient Arxur had returned to its spot at the table, watching me with an unblinking stare that seemed to x-ray my skeleton. Isif's pupils darted between me and Vysith, perhaps regretting relinquishing a Gojid prey to fatten itself up. No doubt

both grays had cued in on my vulnerable areas and fleshiest organs the second I stepped into the room. There was no depth of emotion when I peered deeper into those terrible eyes, unlike when I'd gazed into Marcel's from my jail cell.

The Arxur were soulless predators incapable of kindness; their exteriors had zero cues that didn't scream cold-blooded killing machine. Still, as suicidal as it seemed on an instinctual level, the debt I owed to the UN compelled me to comply with Zhao's urgings. My feet shuffled toward the table with hesitancy, feeling instinctive disgust and apprehension swell within my chest. Every neuron summoned the impulse to run away from the ravenous beast, who I couldn't hope to best with my arms still chained.

Vysith drummed its claws on the table. "Your visit was most insightful, Isif. I'd like to speak to Sovlin alone, and not while being watched like some zoo exhibit."

"I do not know this 'zoo' word; is that a term of the human lexicon?" Isif asked.

"No? It's Morvim, like all my other words."

"Since your language has been dead for many centuries, my knowledge is negligible. I must research this 'zoo' concept; perhaps my human friends can aid me. I'll leave you two be, Vysith."

The Chief Hunter departed from the observation door it came from with Zhao, while the ancient Arxur looked mistrustful of the modern predator that had schooled me. Then again, I suppose I was being foolish to assign any emotion to a gray's countenance. However, it was an undeniable fact that Vysith waited for Isif to be out of earshot to address me directly. The carnivore gestured for Tyler to retake his seat, and it tended to the playing cards it had abandoned. The blond human watched me with disbelieving eyes, relaxing his posture for the first time since I barged in.

"I can't begin to express my shock, waking up to find the genocidal Northwest Bloc *won*…and that the galaxy sees my entire race as people-eating monsters," Vysith hissed. "We were fascinated by the idea of aliens. I guess Betterment has bred out all curiosity too. Your behavior is unhinged, Sovlin, but I agree that these Arxur are beyond saving…they are no longer recognizable. No longer people."

I recoiled at how smooth and reproachful the gray's speech was.

“How could your society ever have had meaningful differences from today?”

“For starters, we cared about each other. Social and non-social Arxur managed different roles in society, being on opposite ends of the spectrum, but we respected the contributions of both types. At least in my nation. The Northwest Bloc wanted to destroy the Morvim Charter though, and we feared the war would kill us all. That might’ve been better than losing to those megalomaniacs. I am so unspeakably horrified by everything the humans say we’ve done since then.”

“Why would you care?”

“Because…they made thinking people cattle, and wiped out entire societies. So many needless deaths, whole generations born into war, and no freedom of expression? Betterment has become so comically villainous, with the titles and hunting obsessions, that it’s not even funny!”

“They didn’t use those titles back in your day? No Your Savageness?” Tyler commented.

“They would’ve been a mockery if they did. What’s admirable about not landing a clean kill, choosing cruelty over honor? Anyhow, I got abducted by the Farsul on a mission to Kyssium, a neutral state the Bloc invaded in their quest for power. I was enlisted as a soldier against those bastards, and I wanted to stop them from hurting innocent civilians…not watch them carry out atrocities in the stars!”

I struggled to meet the beast’s eyes. “Arxur hunters ate my daughter alive.”

“I offer my sincere condolences; that must have been wretched to go through. I’ll have you know I would never do anything like that. The Arxur I knew would *never* commit such vile murders, because it’s unthinkable! It must baffle you that we could’ve ever been anything else, after witnessing such a graphic and personal atrocity. This is a nightmare of epic proportions to me too. Imagine…how you would feel, finding your own species in such diabolical straits centuries later.”

Even with the gravelly register, the content of this beast’s words seemed more like a human’s speech pattern than that of a

terrorizing predator. It was worlds apart from Coth or even Isif; I would've never imagined that an Arxur could put such eloquent, civilized sentences together. Deciding to humor the carnivore, I engaged in the thought exercise. If the Gojids went on to hunt the races of the Federation in gruesome fashion, I would feel like ten times greater of a monster than when we were revealed to be omnivores. What could be more appalling than seeing your species reduced to mindless, hated savages, with its worst members from your time in charge?

"I couldn't bear to see the Gojids committing such heinous acts." I shared a glance with Tyler, and picked up on the flash of agreement in his eyes. The human had wanted me to empathize with an Arxur's plight. "I'd mourn what my species used to be, Vysith. I imagine that's what you're doing."

The predator lowered her reptilian eyes. "Yes, I suppose I am."

Against all odds, I'd survived one Arxur's jaws, and was engaged in decent conversation with another. A part of me wondered if things could've been different, had savagery not overtaken their entire society. Could carnivores have conducted themselves like any other species? The humans had seen something more than malicious monsters from the outset, and with Vysith slashing down my preconceptions, it was tough to claim the primates didn't have a case. For the first time in my life, I spotted a tinge of sapience in the galaxy's original predators.

Chapter 144

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: February 21, 2137

After a lengthy tour aboard the *UNS Rocinante* under Captain Janice Monahan's directive, it was wonderful to have time to myself at home on Leirn. My place of residence had once been a quaint farming city, built around the sales of a staple grain called eard. After Papa refused to adopt the industrial techniques of Federation agriculture, our crop farm had been outcompeted by those who acquiesced to the aliens' ways. Our land was lost within a few years of the exterminators' arrival, and my father toiled in construction work in his old age. It involved grueling, back-breaking tasks to build the very machinations he so despised.

The farm that had been in my family for a dozen generations was gone, never to be passed down to me or my brother, Monar. It wasn't like I had any interest in agricultural professions, beyond perhaps tinkering with some automated tractors to complete the work for me. While I loved innovation, the knowledge I soaked up from the Federation wasn't worth the loss of my culture and the two decades as a "zombie" under their predator disease medications. If I could do it all over again, I would've stayed and helped Papa with the farm, forsaking my true passion.

But then I would've never met Tyler. Tyler might be a dolt, but he never judges me or speaks ill of my culture. The humans have been wonderful.

The village of Rinsa was once the pride and joy of this side of our small continent, with Yotul-built train tracks that allowed us to chug across the landmass in a day. The bullet trains in their place now could zip across the island in an hour. I could still picture the original railroad being blown up during a celebratory speech, as my Gojid engineering instructor goaded me on. The harbor was barely visible behind the new steel buildings, and any green space that had been present was taken up by digitized clutter. The Federation hated water sports, perhaps why Mama's boat had mysteriously caught on fire one night. As much as I missed home, there was an inescapable sadness whenever I toured the sights.

"New plays at the Tail Twine Theatre! First time in over twenty

cycles." A well-groomed Yotul paced on the streets ahead of me, passing out pamphlets to passersby. I remembered the last play I'd seen, a strange tale where the crops came alive and attacked anyone who tried to harvest them. *A predatory story, if you ask the Federation*. "*Tulleo's Feud!* A classic work of drama and stage choreography, about two warring kingdoms! Based on the Grain Wars."

I considered grabbing a pamphlet, but I didn't want to carry it throughout my meeting with the respectable human. My desire to go to the performance was borne of nostalgia and spite for the Federation, as much as anything; it wasn't as if I couldn't acquire an advertising handout on my way home. It wasn't clear why the imperialist aliens took such offense to plays, other than looking down on it as a "primitive form of entertainment." Visual mediums like television and movies were just *better*, after all. I suppose it was a good way to suppress old texts that didn't align with their ideas.

"What would humans think of theatre?" I mused aloud, ignoring the strange looks from people I passed. "They have media that's beyond realistic, run by computer graphics. Perhaps they'd think a bunch of props on a stage are stupid, though they haven't had that response to anything of ours yet."

There were a handful of Terrans in sight on the streets, but I decided to restrain my curiosity. These poor primates were out enjoying a stroll, and didn't want to be interrupted by an energetic Yotul peppering them with questions. I focused instead on the graffiti art on closed down Federation buildings, which was something we'd learned from Earth. The exterminator office had been shuttered once and for all, when all alien occupiers were sent out forcibly by our military. I could see that the institution was almost ready to reopen as a recruiters' office.

The Yotul Technocracy, now a part of the Sapient Coalition, was to be taken seriously at long last. The arrival of the humans had given us an opportunity to throw off the Federation's yoke; everyone who was born before first contact despised what the aliens were doing to Leirn. Our planet's once gorgeous wildlife was turned to cinders by trigger-happy exterminators, burning anything that challenged their narrative. I was grateful that the Terrans were keen on conservation. That was the exact reason I'd agreed to meet up with the renowned Dr. Sara Rosario at a repurposed lab in the village's

heart.

Sara's words fell on deaf ears with the Venlil, but we're happy to accept help rebuilding the ecosystem we used to have. Fresh off the positive results she helped acquire at the Summit, that should leave her riding a high. Her talents won't be wasted on Leirn.

Were I not committed to the military's next orders, I would've loved to devote myself to aiding this project, despite it being well outside my usual purview. If I framed the environment as a machine with cohesive parts, perhaps I could assess what forces drove the greater whole and how to fix the degradation. The supposed "savage predators" understood more about nature than any race I'd encountered; I trusted humanity to salvage as many animals as possible. It seemed it wasn't the flesh-eaters who had utter disregard for "lesser" life.

I ducked into the sprawling research campus, which now featured outdoor enclosures to accommodate lifeforms. Curiously, the Terrans had brought pets from Earth to supplement our native customs; the Yotul government had given clearance for the UN to use its discretion on what to bring. Inside, I could see more creatures that looked like dogs, with varying forms. On a stranger note, a small animal that could fit in a human's hand was yapping at a massive canine. This seemed to scare the much-larger mutt.

I found Dr. Rosario waiting on a couch, and without bothering with pleasantries, I pointed at the tiny, screeching thing. "I know the black-and-brown thing is some sort of dog, like I saw in the military. What is that little thing called?"

The human narrowed her eyes, before chuckling with amusement. "That's also a dog. I know, they look nothing alike; the breed diversity is staggering. I won't pretend we weren't involved with that. Onso, right? We met at the facility—"

"But all Yotul look alike to you. I imagine you get the locals working here mixed up too? Don't worry—I can't tell humans with generic hairmops apart either."

"Hair…mops?"

"I swear I've heard Tyler call them mops, like the cleaning tool, um, which some of you definitely look like…"

"Ha, well, I suppose it's better to look like a cleaning mop than an

evil predator. I'd stick with calling it a hairdo or haircut, but back to your point, there's some humans that look like doppelgängers even to me. I'm glad you understand."

I perked my ears to signal common ground. "It was the same for me with some species that came from the Federation. You have to spend a lot of time around certain ones to pick up on their individual quirks."

"The way we know our dog from someone else's, even if it's the same breed. Er, not to say sapients are pets!"

"Don't worry. I loved my hensa; she was a sweet thing, a lightguard." After seeing Sara's confused reaction, I racked my brain for a human equivalent. "Like 'angels', I think? Noble spirits that watch over Yotul."

"Tyler must've taught you a lot about human culture, to know that."

"Hardly. I researched quite a bit on my own, before I'd even signed up for the exchange program. If I was going to Earth, to help through rebuilding your cities or military service, it would be inconsiderate to not learn the basics of your culture. I didn't want to snub my nose at your customs, like the wretched Federation did to us."

"You're exceptional in that regard. The Yotul are quite laid-back and open-minded, but few have gone the extra mile to parse our cultural references!"

"And humans have gone to great efforts to relate to us and other lifeforms. I confess, I did it because…I was curious, rather than any higher ideal."

"A man after my own heart, Onso. Now, not to cut you off, because I *would* love to keep talking as we walk…but should I give you a tour of our operation?"

"Gladly. Don't worry, I understood what you said earlier about me not being allowed to take any hensa personally. Preserving the species with care and objectivity is most important."

Sara's lips curved upward in that customary human expression, which always registered to my gaze as both a firebrand statement of defiance against Federation norms, and a graceful note of politeness imparted in a split second. It was obvious when the so-called snarl

was malicious; their eyes never lied about their emotions. Those forward-facing orbs were clear as a reflection pool. I trotted after the scientist with the glee of a five-year-old, eager to see a hensa out of my mind's eye. It'd been so long that I didn't trust my memory, especially after that Farsul "doctor" altered my brain with his numbing pills.

I attempted to return my focus to the primates, the only aliens who'd ever treated us as equals. Hundreds of civilizations were worth a pile of manure, in my book, while the humans were a priceless gift. Despite other herbivores labeling Leirn a backwater, we'd received the second-highest total of Terran immigrants—behind only the refugee-laden Skalga. Many were engineers working on raising our own armada from the shipyards; that was another project I wished I played a part in. The Federation had herded us away from building any warships, to avoid disrupting the notion that we were powerless, brainless primitives.

Wouldn't it be the greatest insult if Yotul, in collaboration with humanity, improved upon the tech the Federation lorded over us? We already helped devise several ideas, including the crushing shield-breaking missiles.

"Sara, if you'll humor me, I do have a recent question that my past research overlooked." I reminded myself that there was no shame in our societal development or low-tech endeavors. What mattered is that they were ours. If humanity were going to mock our arts and culture, they weren't the species I'd thought they were. "I remember Haysi said something about humans having 'ancient theaters.' Exactly how ancient were they? Do you have any recollection of what Terran stage plays were like?"

The curly-haired scientist squinted with confusion. "*Were* like? Theatre is one of the oldest forms of entertainment, but you misunderstood me, I think. It's not gone. For one example, back when New York was…still around, there were numerous Broadway plays, which were well-regarded in many circles."

"Really?! Um, sorry to sound so surprised…I just figured you'd think it's outdated, like the other aliens."

"The Federation are a bunch of judgmental killjoys. Don't you know that by now? Just because newer, fancier ideas exist, doesn't mean older stuff can't have its charm."

“I agree. I just asked because our playhouses are reopening, after being shuttered for years. It interests me what your ‘Broadway plays’ were like.”

“There were some that were dramas and such, but it was most well-known for musicals. You know, actors sing songs to advance the story while doing choreographed, synchronized dances.”

I stifled a snort of laughter, lingering on the mental image. “Which herbivore wrote those for you? Everyone knows predators aren’t capable of something so sentimental and dorky.”

“I know you’re joking, but if you ask the Feds, it’s all part of our master plan.”

“If how off-key Tyler sings reflects on all humans, it is part of your plan…to make sapients clutch our ears in agony.”

Sara snickered for a brief moment, as we stepped into a restricted wing of the research facility. I halted in my tracks as my gaze focused on a couch, where a tan hensa with jagged black stripes was prancing atop it. The once-beloved, near-extinct pet brushed up against the back of one human’s head, and nipped at his earlobe. The primate was laughing, teeth visible from ear to ear; there was no question about how this Terran felt about our old friends.

A few humans were down on all fours playing with yarn and laser pointers, while the more sedentary hominids allowed hensas to settle on their laps. The adoration was mutual; the small animals seemed fond of the Terrans, perhaps because of their willingness to afford attention. It used to be said that hensas were excellent judges of character. Watching an Earthling scratch a rumbling pet’s forward-facing ears (a predator trait that the humans curiously lacked), I wondered whether they wouldn’t keep our non-sapient pals for their own people.

Certainly beats breaking into our homes, and burning them alive in front of us. Fuck the Federation.

For the small number of Yotul who’d been able to harbor hensas all these years, it must’ve been difficult to persuade them to hand their companions over to the Terrans. However, witnessing the care afforded by our arboreal allies, I believed these scientists could give us a fighting chance to bring back the most culturally-significant species on Leirn. It was the only way to ensure the hensas’ numbers

were padded, and that future generations could enjoy their company once more. Perhaps, if the pest-killing hunters flourished here again, humans might transport a few back to Earth for adoption.

“We love these little guys, Onso! How could even the Feds hurt such cutie pies?” Sara approached the couch Terran, picking up the hensa. I pretended not to notice her voice climb in pitch, and in turn, she passed the tan animal into my shaking paws. “We brought some puppies and kittens, our darlings from Earth. You could adopt a few of them in the meantime, while we’re repopulating the hensas.”

“I’m glad you invited me here to see this. You’re doing good work.” I pulled my paw tight around the hensa’s belly, scared to drop her. Tears swelled in my eyes, as the graphic memories of my pet burning returned. “Ahem. Tyler has a b-big dog, a Great Dane. That thing could swallow a human’s hand. He left the gentle giant with his dad while he deployed…maybe for good.”

“It’s difficult for pets to be relocated…they don’t understand. It’s kind to force that change of scenery on them as little as possible.”

“Yeah. If I get to retire from military service one day, I’d like to adopt a big canine like his. Nobody’d ever mess with me again. And someday, maybe I could have another hensa, preferably before I die. Leirn can be our world, like it used to be.”

“You want to make all of that a reality? I could put in a word with the UN, get them to call in a favor with your government. Could ask for you to be sent right here. You’ve seen as much direct action as any Yotul, from what I’ve heard—a true hero. We owe you the chance to help with the rebirth, the renaissance of Leirn.”

My head tilted sideways, considering her words. “You would do that, Sara? That sounds…wonderful. I mean, I do want to kick the Feddies in the teeth, but I could use a…break from all that. We finished the Farsul off. We exposed the info in the Archives. I could be useful here now.”

“It’s your choice. You can think on it: I don’t need an answer today. But I’d love the chance to work with you, and pick your brain as one science-obsessed individual to another. Just like my work with the cattle rescues is done, maybe your stint in the stars has reached its end too.”

“Okay. Uh, not to sound greedy, because I *am* grateful for the opportunity to help—but does this pay? Papa needs to retire, and I can’t make that happen without a steady salary.”

The human pioneer took the hensa from me, and passed a note into my paws in its place. “I looked up how to write in Yotul numerals. I didn’t misprint a thing.”

I nearly choked on my own saliva, as I skimmed across the six figure number in sloppy handwriting. Sara couldn’t be serious! The difference this could make in my family’s life—not only could I serve Leirn, but I could have the financial means to support all of my loved ones. It was difficult to think of a reason to redeploy, if Dr. Rosario could follow through on her promise to transfer me here. Unless there was an existential threat in the stars, this was my chance to finally be happy. Tyler, the cantankerous Sovlin, and I had earned some time on the sidelines.

I was bouncing on my hindlegs with excitement, before I knew it, and I darted out of the lab to avoid embarrassing myself with a celebration. My eyes must’ve been glowing, as I unclipped my holopad from my belt. That enthusiasm fizzled in a heartbeat, when I saw an ominous message from my human best friend—the very person I’d been wanting to contact with the good news. My heart sank into my stomach, faced with a difficult decision.

Hey Onso. Soooo looks like I have to go with the UN into Kolshian territory :(Those bastards have Slanek, and if I don’t save the day, Marcel’s gonna do something stupid. He’s supposed to leave stupid things to me, right? Anyhow, let me know if you’re in or if you’re out. You don’t have to come. Miss ya, buckaroo.

I could feel bile rising into my throat, as I was torn between loyalty to my friend and a chance at an authentic, peaceful life. Offers like the one Sara presented to me wouldn’t come around every day; it was everything I could’ve dreamed of. However, it had always been a no-brainer that Tyler and I stuck together. How would I feel if I forced the human to ship out without me, and something terrible happened to him? Who would watch his back if I wasn’t there?

The last thing I wanted was to head back to the war after enduring Khoa, Sillis, and Talsk, but my friend was counting on me to accompany him to the most difficult fight yet. Even if Tyler would never say it, he was expecting me to tag along; I’d been adamant

over joining him on his perilous rescue mission of Marcel on Sillis. Had it not been an exercise in futility, perhaps I would've mentioned to my buddy that he kept putting himself in harm's way for Mr. Fraser and Slanek.

That was just who Tyler was—someone who helped out his "bros." That was why I knew, if the roles were reversed, he would've agreed to join me in a heartbeat; no incentives or comfort could've swayed his decision. It was also the reason I accepted that I had to turn down the offer of a lifetime, and follow my human buddy to Aafa. A serene existence on Leirn, with a monster-sized dog curled up on my bed, would have to wait until after we delivered some justice to the heart of the Federation.

Chapter 145

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 3, 2137

The march toward Kolshian territory couldn't happen in a single step; rather, it was a monumental push throughout the galaxy. The Terrans stopping by Leirn to integrate a handful of Yotul-built ships into their formation proved convenient. I didn't need to ferry myself to Earth when the UN were docking above my world. Even if they would never give voice to these sentiments, I knew humans thought most herbivores were liabilities in combat. However, they showed no such reservations about having vessels crewed by our fiery sailors.

The minutiae of Yotul bureaucracy were also unique in our relations with Earth. No other species would've dared to host an exchange program on human soil, but millions of our kind were already there for the rebuilding efforts. The first meeting took place in a city called Brussels, the heart of some amalgamate faction known as the European Union. Tyler, for a man as lacking in foresight as he was, attempted a delicate tap-dance around prey sensibilities at first. Perhaps the UN's program had suggested such restrictions for the human side, but I suspected my pal drew those conclusions from interacting with Venlil.

Regardless, hosting the meet-up on Terran ground meant that, despite my gushing about the smallest details of our home, Tyler had never actually seen or set foot on Leirn. I was bouncing with excitement for the tour I had planned; the sole upside of shipping out in this manner was getting to nerd out about my hometown. Finally, an alien who cared about us, or…pretended to care. The big guy certainly cared about *me,* but I knew he'd find my grocery list of fun facts boring.

"Alright, Onso. Look alive; they're almost here." I perked my ears up as the shuttle docked in the spaceport, and waved once I spotted the massive human among a crowd of sailors docking for a few hours of shore leave. "Tyler! Over here."

The blond hominid strolled over with a goofy grin. "How's it going, buddy? Up top!"

I obliged the Terran's odd tradition of smacking his raised hand, and wagged my tail. "I'm glad to finally get to show you around Leirn. I know we only have a few hours, so that means we've got to hurry."

"I'd pace yourself, Onso, you're dealing with a persistence predator!"

"A persistence predator whose diet has been entirely ramen and mac-and-cheese. Those carbs are gonna keep you persistently on your ass."

"So you *did* read my texts."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say to a blurry, crooked picture of a half-eaten cup of ramen with a plastic fork in it…and a few noodles hanging over the side."

"It's called keeping in touch. Not all of us can be all 'e equals em cee squared!'"

"Pfft, you don't even know what those letters mean."

"Ouch. Alright, alright, you win the ribbing contest. As a reward, I guess I'll let you play the new video games I brought. This time, I picked ones with turn-based combat; if you smash another controller, I'm gonna make you sit and watch me play."

"You can't *make* me do anything, Tyler…but, er, I'm sorry about the controllers?"

"It's okay, not your money you're pissing down the drain, eh? Easy come, easy go."

"Quit ragging on me. I don't have great control of my temper, but you know I haven't been able to even feel angry at all for the past 20 years. My neurochemistry is fucked forever."

When I'd first come off the mind-numbing drugs, it was right after the Yotul Technocracy voted to join the Terrans, following Noah's speech on Aafa. The daily screenings stopped at my engineering job in a flash, once the Federation was driven off-world in the Great Reclaiming. Having a name like "the Great Reclaiming" already was a clear sign about how *not great* we thought the alien occupiers were. The Farsul had instituted a puppet government, but when given an out, Yotul weren't compliant with their maddening decrees. Anyone who maintained loyalty to the alien league was

ousted, and we sought to make ourselves respectable.

After all the horrible things the Federation said about sapient predators, it was obvious it differed from reality. Ambassador Laulo's reports of how the humans stood up for us "primitives" made it clear they were the only ones who saw the injustice of it all. Siding with them gave us a fresh start.

The current government had settled on the Technocracy name in opposition to the primitive jabs that plagued us in the 22 years since our "uplift." These new officials were unelected, something Tyler had been surprised I was okay with. It would be a rude awakening to him that people claiming power to overthrow the Federation tyrants were wildly popular; we'd been denigrated for years, and we'd rather have an imperfect government of our own species than one of imperialists. The main focus was centralizing authority across Leirn, rather than clinging to the loose, local overseers that the aliens had used to keep us divided.

"I was just giving ya shit, buddy. I didn't mean to strike a nerve." Tyler's expression had become concerned. "You should know this already, but I care about you way more than any controller. Handling emotions is hard as fuck, even for those of us who've had decades of practice. If it makes you feel any better, grown-ass humans get mad about stupider shit than that. I still remember how my batshit crazy old man would scream at the poor umpire in my Little League games."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I responded.

"The gist of it is, adults get pissed because *their kids* lose games, when they're playing for fun. It doesn't matter. My dad's a nutter, always has been. I'd rather you smash a million controllers than do something that extra."

"Your stories never seem to translate, but I appreciate you trying. Why don't we get to touring Leirn?"

"Let's go, Onso, *Living Geyser of Fun Facts*?"

"I like information, and I like sharing it unprovoked. There's worse things out there. Besides, if we're going to be shipping off to the hardest battle of our time together, this is the one upside."

"The *one* upside? What about hanging with your best friend, Tyler?"

"I'm kinda indifferent to that part of the trip."

“Fuck you! Bah, lead the way.”

The blond human’s head was on a swivel as we exited the spaceport, soaking in the digital adverts that remained. I could remember, before the Federation’s arrival, Rinsa’s current hub of spacecraft had been home to scribes; the printing press rendered the profession of transcribing or copying documents by hand obsolete. It had been the perfect complex to add to the demolition list, and replace with something modern. The location set it a block away from the bullet trains that were built atop the ruins of our railroads.

More interestingly to Tyler, some Yotul had dabbled in various Terran cultural imports, by choice. Tail dyeing was in with the younger crowd. I could see one teen with a bright blue tail, which clashed with his reddish fur, pass by us. Others took a fancy to adorning themselves with shiny objects, and were wearing trinkets around their forearms or necks. That jewelry trend caught on with numerous generations, since hand laborers often bound straps around their wrists in the old days. Transforming a symbol of the working class into a classy icon had mass appeal.

“I didn’t know aliens dyed their fur,” Tyler remarked.

I swished my tail lazily. “We did, but not weird colors, until we met you crazy primates. Some Yotul used powdered leaves to conceal gray fur, but not on this continent. Age is considered a sign of wisdom here in Rinsa.”

“Pfft, getting long in the tooth doesn’t mean you’re wise. It’s about the total sum of your life lessons, and some people don’t learn lessons no matter how long they’re taught. Source: my dad exists.”

“You don’t like your dad, and you left your dog with him?”

“Well, it’s better than a shelter. There’s all sorts of abandoned animals running around on the outskirts of ruined cities. It’s sad… wouldn’t do that to ol’ Zeus.”

“Your dog’s name! I’ve done some research into human mythology to understand that nomenclature. We had a pantheon of gods ourselves, you know. There were a handful of followers, up until the Feddies decided it was too *primitive* to salvage; the old customs were most popular outside the island. One deity was like Zeus but… I don’t understand why thunder was the king in many human circuits.”

“Because it’s loud and it burns shit, and that’s cool. I’m pretty sure some mythos had sun gods and all, and there’s lots of top-dog creation and death gods too. I dunno. Who led your pantheon?”

“Ralchi, the god of fire. He was considered the most powerful god, able to melt or destroy anyone who challenged him. Giver of warmth, who lit the very sun.”

“So Ralchi is a sun god of sorts. Your people got that ‘flames in the sky’ shit pretty right. The sun kinda is a big fireball.”

“We don’t consider him a god of the sun, not alone, anyways. Ralchi’s priests were adamant about the signs he’d send. Our lunar satellite isn’t the right proportions and distance to have total eclipses like on Earth, but when the sun had a shadow over it, Ralchi was threatening to take it away. Forests catch on fire, judgment. A building goes up in flames, Ralchi cursed its owner.”

“So what do you think Ralchi thinks about human fire-eaters?”

“Ralchi doesn’t think anything, because he’s not fucking real. As for what I think—I think you shouldn’t put fire in your mouth. Divine or not, respect nature a little.”

“We do. It’s better than the other aliens, who used fire to…shit. I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“To burn animals alive? It’s alright. If Ralchi were real, he’d give those exterminator pricks a taste of their own medicine.”

Tyler stopped in his tracks, narrowing his eyes. “Onso, after what happened the past month, I just feel obligated to restate that…if you were ever having thoughts about doing something like that, I hope you’d talk to me. Maybe I say all the wrong things, but there’s nothing I wouldn’t try to help with. I’d be fucking rabid if someone torched Zeus, so I’m not gonna give you some pacifist bullshit. Just…don’t get obsessed with revenge, and don’t not reach out?”

“Tyler, I’ve *always* talked about hating the Feds. But I can assure you, while I struggle with my temper, I’m not going to lose it for good like Slanek. I’m going to kill those bastards in a disciplined way, by highlighting their shit-ass ships on the sensors screen. That’s what we’re doing: bringing them down.”

“Hell yeah! We’re bringing them down the right way too, because we’re better than ’em. I’d say us humans are soft, but that’s not really true—it’s more that once we open that can of worms, doing

evil shit, it doesn't get closed. So we don't cross those lines. If you ever feel any way about that, you can tell me; I might even fucking agree with you. That clear?"

"Hmph, well, I do think that you're soft, but I can also see how you're better than those immoral, colonizing pricks. I have no problem following human orders, for that reason. Even if I don't understand, I trust you. My bluster is just a way of coping with everything they did, and you know that."

"I do. But I'd rather not assume and check, than have anything happen to you. I'd be all shades of torn up if I lost you, Onso. You're my *much* smarter bro."

The blond human gave me a hearty slap on the back, and I tried to shake off the slight stinging sensation from that affectionately-intentioned gesture. It was fresh in my mind how Slanek had declared that he had predator disease, and outright stated that he was aggressive and unstable. My short fuse was something I recognized as a problem, but I was nothing like that Venlil. It was good to know Tyler would check on me, and that I could talk to him about anything. When I'd confessed all of the buried baggage about my hensa after Sillis, prompted by the sight of Dino, my exchange partner had been sympathetic and supportive.

Tyler may not seem like it from the outside, but he's such a soft guy. He's been helpful in letting me express and address my feelings for the first time since the Federation arrived. No predator or prey behavior shtick, just acceptance.

I jogged down the sidewalk, not wanting to remain sidetracked. "I just build rockets, Tyler. Anyone can do that."

"Don't rub it in now. Save that remark for Sovlin," Tyler pouted. "Speaking of that racist old Gojid…you'll never believe this, but you know that Arxur I was guarding? Sovlin started lobbying for the UN to *let Vysith enlist* like she wanted to!"

"I'm not that gullible."

"It's true! Obviously, we can't have Vysith on a ship with other herbivore crew, even if it wouldn't piss off the Dominion. Sovlin's on latrine duty for the *entire* trip over, so be sure to rub it in his face. Aliens gotta learn to respect orders, ya don't get a damn pass every other day."

“Don’t go lumping me in with the witless Feds. All aliens aren’t like that. I’ve never disobeyed an order. Now, this is my one chance to show you around Rinsa, and I plan to regurgitate everything I know.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The unlucky Terran was subjected to verbose speeches on every landmark; with him present, my sadness over the cultural losses was a blip on my mental radar. I pointed out Tail Twine Theatre, which had a bustling ticket booth. Crowds had poured out in droves to see the classic play, which had been running for over a week now. The entire entertainment district could be refurbished off of the proceeds, with a fair being hosted next month. Yotul acrobats were returning, not having performed since the Federation swore off their stunts as “senseless, primitive derangement.”

Tyler was also shown to an unassuming tower of dirt down the road, an “auspice field.” Yotul would toss a spare seed into the tilled soil, based on an old superstition that it would bring good harvests and fortune. The human didn’t mock the practice as unscientific; instead, he wagged a finger at it like he recognized it. Surprisingly, despite their scientific advancement, many Terrans believed in luck—I learned they had similar concepts, namely wishing wells and fountains that they threw coins into. I marveled yet again that a capable, advanced species of extraterrestrials could hold onto past practices.

“We got stuff we think’s bad luck,” Tyler added. “Walking under ladders, breaking mirrors, opening umbrellas inside. Sometimes it’s as random as the number 13 or seeing a black cat. No rhyme or reason. You guys got anything like that?”

“Um…” I noticed that I was passing the old, now-shuttered, predator disease facility, where that awful Farsul doctor had treated me. Though I knew this had once been a cutting-edge factory, I would rather talk about luck than this accursed building. “It’s bad luck to get rainwater in your ears. Something about stealing it from the plants? It’s also bad luck to look at a sundial without light shining on it.”

“So not at night or in a storm.”

“Yeah. Some people are superstitious enough to cover sundials up in the evening, or when they see clouds on the horizon. I don’t

really believe in such things, but there's no reason to tempt fate. Just in case."

"Same. It's easy enough to not limbo my way under a ladder."

I glanced back over my shoulder, in the other direction from Tail Twine Theatre. The research campus, where Sara Rosario had invited me to join her hensa preservation team, was that way. Tyler would be elated to meet a hensa and learn about the project, but I didn't want to explain what I'd forsaken to re-up with his squad. The last thing I sought was for my friend to feel guilty over a choice I made of my own volition. That pathing also was the direction of my father's current worksite, where his crew were building a gun range, but I suspected he'd be ashamed for me to introduce him to a human there.

You know where the Federation wouldn't want us to go? The harbor. Tyler used to go fishing with his father, and I used to sail—I know we both like water.

I turned left, zipping toward the harbor. "Here's where we end the tour, Tyler! If Mama's boat hadn't gone up in smoke, I'd take you for a ride."

The blond human stepped onto the dock, and I noticed that several of his kind were present in the marina. Few recreational boats were left, with the rows of moored vessels mostly bringing cargo from outside the islands. The Federation, contradictory to their goals of preventing deep-sea exploration, seemed to have gone after anything that looked primitive. I guess their priorities got tangled up. Tyler patrolled the length of the boardwalk, and given his enthrallment, I decided my commentary wasn't necessary.

The Earthling wandered away from the boats, finding a small sandy strip to admire the vista. A relaxed smile spread across his face, and he removed his shoes and socks. He wiggled his toes in the dull green sand, before wandering closer to the water. I tailed behind him, ignoring the irritating feel of grits in my fur. How could anyone see how drawn humans were to nature, and think that it was derivative of some hunting instinct? No other species appreciated beauty quite as much as the "predators."

Tyler turned his head to look at me. "This is wonderful! I'll tell you what, Onso. We make it back from Kolshian space, and I'll find someone to teach you how to surf. I need to see a Yotul hang ten."

“Something to look forward to on our return? You got a deal,” I chuckled.

The human flashed his teeth, mirth glowing in his blue eyes. With the hours ticking down before our time to ship out, we sat and enjoyed the sound of crashing waves against Leirn’s shoreline. Together, the two of us could find a way to pull through against any foe.

Chapter 146

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 5, 2137

When Vysith referred to Arxur today as “no longer people,” I decided the visitation was a lost cause. Secretary-General Zhao’s directive to liberate Mileau would be my focus; we’d have to stumble into morality the old-fashioned way, through trial and error. The humans could guide us down the roads of sophistication and ethics, with the principled backbone that held Earth together in the wake of the raid. As much as I loved Felra, allowing her to dictate my beliefs and behaviors was neither fitting nor desirable. The first phase to bring down the Kolshian empire was loosening their hold on the Dossur world, and thereby sending my friend home.

I’d decided to leave Felra with a human garrison at their fledgling colony in Mazic space, called *Liberty’s Bastion.* It was unsafe for her to come with us to a vicious battle, when there was a non-zero chance of us being killed in action. A fine Arxur commander led by example, proving their mettle and relishing the opportunity for a contest of strength. Even if we had been relaying orders from far-off, I thought it wise to keep my mind tactically sharp. I couldn’t afford to worry about whether Felra wanted Oleksiy’s beef jerky, while plasma beams were sizzling around us. The Terran guards would be more disciplined without the “cute” rodent around too; I had faith that they could conduct themselves well under peril. I observed the trusted Arxur I’d called onto the bridge, filling in vital stations, and considered what this meant for my legitimacy.

Forty thousand ships. That’s the number the humans gave me, for the original force that seized Mileau.

I gazed out the viewport at the fleet I commanded. The thick armor of Arxur warships merited respect, alongside the punishing twin plasma guns that could skewer an opposing vessel. The rotund belly of our vessels broke up the otherwise angular build; missiles were stuffed into the underside, as we shared the affinity for toting explosives with the Terrans. A traditional Federation ship would’ve cowered at the sight of our firepower, but the secret fleet of the

Kolshians had an answer for all of our inventions. Standing aboard a craft of the aforementioned make, I felt woefully exposed.

Coordinating disruptions against Dominion targets was one thing; they weren't expecting resistance, and they didn't have any tools at their disposal that we couldn't predict. Waging a battle against a superior enemy, with the ragtag armada at my disposal, was daunting. Proper warships didn't comprise the entirety of my force, as we had to rely on anything with a drive that fell into our jaws. The Terrans had parted with some smaller or obsolete craft they had no use for, which did little but pad our spaceworthy ranks. Stolen Arxur transports, retrofitted with guns, were lacking in maneuverability, firepower, and armor.

The classic, intimidating warships were the few that captains had been bribed into stealing. The other ship classes were designed with the intent of bringing soldiers to the ground to take a planet, not for exchanging blows with an advanced fleet of drones. Zhao had promised to support us, so I was hoping humanity had sent something substantial to our aid. We needed any assistance we could get; taking serious losses might as well be total defeat, with our limited numbers. The strategies I devised would also need to be good enough to outfox the Kolshians.

"Chief Hunter, there's an incoming transmission from the Yotul Technocracy. Shall I read it?" Oleksiy Bondarenko asked.

I glanced up from my holodisplay. "Please do."

"'The humans have requested that we aid you in retaking Mileau. We have been amassing an armada since the Battle of Earth, with aid from Terran engineers, and feel that these vessels are ready for deployment. Two thousand newly-minted ships will warp in just behind your position. We'll advance on your signal, and see how our weaponry fares in action.'"

"So this is the first battle for these Yotul ships—crewed fully by Yotul, without human intercession, yes? This is how Zhao interpreted me asking for assistance?!"

"The tail end of the message says that more help is on the way, sir."

A growl rumbled in Kaisal's throat at the sensor station. "We all know how well the prey wage war. Our number are barely above the five digit range. If the humans expect us to push forward,

uncertain we can create a decisive edge, we must rethink our strategy."

"Yes, I appreciate your input, Kaisal. I trust you to preside honorably over your station. Humans, do you have any ideas of what this 'other help' might look like? I cannot feel confident in an aiding force's abilities when it's all militaries of former Federation members."

Lisa Reynolds glanced up from her briefing report. "I've been in touch with my UN contacts. As I understand it, the Duerten Homogeneity are not responding, even to Sapient Coalition parties that aren't us. It's possible that they're ignoring us, but given their involvement in the assassination plot, it's suspected that Kalqua is under siege. A show of force…a warning."

"Nikonus may have been in league with Giznel, but his death changes little. I would not be surprised if the Duerten incurred the full wrath of the Federation. Even with their so-called Shield, they stand little chance against the shadow fleet."

"I agree, and I don't know what they were thinking. All I know is they were livid about having their free thought brainwashed away. Humanity…despite our differences, we would likely bail the Duerten out if they asked. With their hatred for us, they would sooner see their world burn than invite *predators* into their territory."

"Why do you side with, and help, the very races that despise you?" Kaisal demanded.

"I agree with the runt." My nostrils flared, as the Yotul's promised ships arrived on cue. Human empathy could be directed to undeserved places, at times. "If the Federation weren't a greater threat, and it were possible to secure Earth's obliteration, I hazard a guess that the Duerten would do so without question."

Olek shrugged. "We need more ships fighting for us and less ships fighting against us. Simple. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer."

"The Duerten have unusual motives, but humanity always holds out hope of a species warming to us. We didn't want to fight everyone like this," Lisa said. "Look at all that's happened. The Dossur have been occupied for months, for the crime of befriending us."

“We have to break this stalemate here and now. No matter what, we have the human forces that are deadlocked here, in the system, holding the line as we speak. What we’ve got isn’t even a third of the total size of their fleet—but it has to be enough to turn the tide.”

“I suppose it does, Olek,” I sighed. “Thank the Yotul for their aid, and patch them into our comms. We’ll see very soon if they’re at all competent.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Yotul vessels were visible on the viewport, and had a different aesthetic from any craft I’d seen before. There was some mild displeasure on the rebellion’s channels over integrating with herbivore forces. The Technocracy’s commanders seemed capable of mobilizing craft into formation, though it was their combat readiness we all doubted. If the supposed reinforcements turned tail and fled when the gunfire commenced, I’d have some scathing remarks for Zhao once this was over. It was my hope that the humans knew what they were doing.

If the Terrans hadn’t proved themselves to my men at Fahl, I suspect I’d hear more objections. After that demolition, saving our hides, the UN could put a syasara in charge of the armada and receive only grumbles from our people. Humanity has earned our trust.

Olek told me that humanity was involved in designing these vessels, which meant the Yotul warships could be more devious than they seemed at first glance. The strange shapes and features of the unknown classes suggested something was up with them. Conspiracy-loving Bondarenko adjusted his glasses, seeming to read a message on the comms station. Kaisal’s posture stiffened by the sensors, and I parsed that our other assistance had arrived. My tail lashed with expectancy, waiting for one of those two to fill me in on the new development.

“1000 new contacts on screen, ID’d as human drones,” Kaisal announced.

Olek scratched his chin scruff. “Can confirm. I’ve received a communique with the info needed to relay commands to the drones. They’re human, but we’ve entrusted them to your overarching directives.”

“That’s not as many as I’d hoped Earth would send, but I suppose you have little left to give,” I mused. “Very well. Place them on the front lines, and forward our planned course.”

The human drones deciphered the gist of my plan, and maneuvered their way to our leading edge. I could see that the Kolshian occupiers had detected our arrival, though they couldn’t afford to break off from their current engagements. A lapse in the deadlock line would allow for the Terran drones in system, already pressing, to make headway. A worrisome issue crossed my mind, as I watched opposing beams traverse wide swathes of space. With the only sizable manned contingents being from my rebellion and the Yotul, which foot soldiers would clear Mileau of enemy troops?

If we liberate the system, I hope the humans will supply ground forces. Arxur landing will be perceived as a raid, and I wouldn’t expect herbivore soldiers like the Yotul to be able to drive out any trained military.

My focus was on executing the battle plan I’d devised; when my skeptical commanders relayed an openly disdainful explanation to the Yotul, the herbivores acted as if they understood. It’d been conveyed in terms suited for a toddler, since that was about where the Federation’s military competency stacked up. Despite the disadvantages we faced, I had to remember that this was for Felra. My best friend’s people were subjugated, and while she never complained, I knew that had to weigh on her mind.

The Arxur rebellion commanders followed my orders without question, with the obsequiousness and reverence owed to a Chief Hunter. It was simpler to mingle with my people without Felra miring my image, but the cruel acts I’d committed in the past hadn’t escaped my underlings’ memory. After witnessing my interactions, they’d seen defective behavior that didn’t align with that history. I had to prove that I could be a respected commander without cruelty. It was not just about retaining their loyalty, but also being able to interact with other Arxur as equals. Vysith had reminded me that true shamefulness stemmed from not acting empathetic enough.

“We’re keeping our strategies as simple as can be. Approach the skirmish line from a wide angle, and split the Kolshians’ attention,” I ordered. “With any luck, it’ll disorder their formation, and give

the Terran forces already present a chance to break through for the kill."

Kaisal was busy highlighting each Yotul ship on the sensors. "If these prey-crewed vessels can't commit to a simple flanking pass, they're dead weight."

"I know. I'm not counting on the Yotul to do much more than draw fire off of us—which is fine by me. Onward."

In strict formation, the fleet careened to the outskirts of the action, and coasted in for a bird's eye view of the Kolshian forces. Thousands of automatons were warding off the primates, having kept the battle well outside Mileau's sanctum. The hum of our engines in the floor was tame now, but we were ready to burn hard to swoop across our foes' exposed side. Our weapons station was locked and loaded, as soon as we got within optical range of the enemy fleet. I strapped into the commander's chair, in case the inertial dampers were pushed too far during combat.

The enemy drones definitely spotted us, because the nearest elements pivoted toward us to prepare for an onslaught. An AI's omnidirectional view trumped even the ranging periphery of herbivores. A few foes lunged forward toward the existing Terran line, in an attempt to dissuade the friendly automatons from pushing ahead and capitalizing on our arrival. I was grateful that the vessels leading our own charge were the handful of reinforcement drones Zhao coughed up; I'd prefer they absorbed the worst of the hostile fire, rather than a ship with lives aboard. I didn't dislike the Yotul, and despite mistrusting their competency, that was a "guilty by association" view.

I respect how they try to act brave; that's half of actually *having bravado, yes? Of all the parties at the Summit that heard my speech, only one ex-Fed was willing to work with me.*

With an enemy force engaged at a ninety degree angle to our approach vector, we pushed the thrusters to full burn. Numerous Kolshian craft had re-oriented their weapons to face us, anticipating the greater threat of our flanking force raking their line. If the onboard programs were aware the lead commander was an Arxur, I suppose I'd been predictable. Our reputation indicated that I'd choose an aggressive course of action. Simple maneuvers amid a crowded battlefield were proven across eons. Attempting to outwit

a machine with faster decision-making power was an exercise in futility, unless you were a delusional Terran. Their spontaneity and wild ideas were nothing if not unpredictable; it was both their genius and their derangement.

Lisa's eyes were focused on our human allies. "Sir, I recommend we keep our movement vectors clear of any friendly nanodrone swarms or shield-breakers. With your permission, I'll keep combat stations apprised of such deployments and the affected radius."

"Good idea. Fifty seconds to first volley; we are not to stumble into friendly munitions, but we will not shy away from engagement, yes?" I hissed.

Olek cracked his knuckles. "We're back where Lisa and I first met you, Chief Hunter. Those military black budgets had to turn up something useful, huh? Let's get it done."

Subordinate Arxur on the bridge maintained submissive postures, though I could see a zeal for bringing down the Kolshians in many eyes. Nikonus had partnered with the oppressive Betterment office to ensure that our kind would never seek peace; that was enough to spawn a growl from my own chest. With narrowed eyes and a surge of adrenaline, I soaked in every detail. The bulk of the Kolshian drones remained locked in their struggle with Terran opposites, and thirteen thousand rebel-controlled ships were barreling toward the enemy's poorly-defended flank. Could shadow fleet drones withstand the initial onslaught, long enough for manned Kolshian reinforcements to reach them from Mileau?

Any commander knew there was nothing easy about overcoming five digits worth of ships. The drones under my oversight led the way, weaving through enemy fire with mechanical precision. Our armada glided behind them, as billowing explosions rocked the lines of both parties. My warship was insulated from the brunt of the fray, but we were vigilant for any munitions that slipped through the crack. Salvos of missiles were being traded like claw swipes, deflected or landing based on the receiving party's situational awareness. Debris littered the system from the months-long battle, and we were only adding to it; disabled ships drifted helplessly along vectors from when maneuvering power was lost.

"Navigations, I'm forwarding hazards I've located to avoid collisions," Kaisal barked.

Lisa's head snapped toward me. "I haven't seen any shield-breakers coming from the UN line, but they're pushing forward to take advantage of distraction. Many Kolshians have shield outages, so I can assume that occurred well before our arrival."

I drew a measured breath. "Thank you. Adjust trajectory as needed, and await my orders to fire on any important foes."

Our vessel wove around the wreckage of an eviscerated enemy craft, and our plasma guns sizzled in wait of Kaisal's next target offering. The rebel ships weren't as nimble as hostile drones, but our heavy hitters packed more firepower. Twin railguns from warships scorched the flesh of nearby foes, taking advantage of the shields that were downed in lieu of our arrival. The Terran armada was surging forward all along the defensive line, rallied by the obvious devastation we'd sown. A pair of Kolshian drones collided, overwhelmed by the combined crossfire, and we were gift-wrapped an easy shot against another short-circuiting defender. I ensured my outward stoic professionalism, despite my internal celebration, as our plasma tore a gash in an enemy's circuitry.

The Arxur portion of the plan was going swimmingly, but I noticed worrying movements in the wings. Rather than playing a supporting role, the Yotul had separated from our ranks and were spreading out across the Kolshian lines. Why were they breaking formation? Those herbivores should've let the predator militaries handle this! We couldn't have the humans' long-awaited chance to break through ruined by bumbling incompetence. With the feeling that I was watching a disaster in motion, I diverted my focus to the Technocracy ships going off on their own. The Kolshians were bound to teach the marsupials a lesson in humility.

Chapter 147

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 5, 2137

The Yotul warships had split from our formation, and attracted the ire of the Kolshian drones. It was impressive, in a way, that herbivores were able to organize proper movements, but this demonstrated reckless abandon. These craft were fresh from Leirn's shipyards, and weren't automated like the enemy; no biologic could reach decisions as quickly as a computer. Terrans could circumvent this by stumping the onboard programs with new technologies and strategies, yet it was absurd to anticipate exceptional advances from a vegetation-munching species who hadn't shown war mastery.

The enemy drones swiveled their railguns with perfect precision, and plasma lances spooled out from the barrels as the Yotul drew close. The marsupials were unflinching; they seemed to be flying themselves directly into the weapons' path! Were these Technocracy pilots suicidal, or did they assume out of inexperience that shields would prevent any damage from seeping through? My eyes zeroed in on one allied vessel, knowing I couldn't get my own people killed to bail out herbivores dabbling in stupidity. An arc of brilliance was racing to greet the vessel, which was forging ahead with no thought to self-preservation.

The Yotul vessel was strangely shaped, looking more like a cube than a sleek, aerodynamic contraption. The blocky form made it more of a target, rather than one that could twirl away or place lengthy guns along a slender back. With an inbound munition hellbent on its demise, the Technocracy ship bobbed as though riding a wave. The hull plating unclasped before my eyes, revealing a normal-looking craft below. The metal shell propelled itself into the plasma beam, immolated while the ejected fuselage remained intact.

The outer layer acts as a decoy against the targeting systems, while the key mechanisms can break from the hold—the way primitive rockets detach stages after their purpose is fulfilled. Were humans involved with building these Yotul ships?

The leaner boat released from within the shell had its weapons ready, though it wasn't utilizing traditional plasma, kinetics, or explosives. The Yotul's chosen weaponry was almost like a cannon protruding from its belly, but there was no trace of any visible munitions being fired. The flash was only perceptible as *something* struck the Kolshian drones, scorching their hull from the close-range vantage point. It was an invisible force which seemed to leap across space in an instant, like it was traveling close to light speed in realspace. Without shields, the enemy was unprotected from the heat generated on my readout from the unseen impact.

The enemy drone I was focused on wasn't alone in having its plating liquified and the sensitive circuitry within fried in seconds. There was nothing the Kolshians could do to fight back or defend themselves; they were blindsided by this vicious innovation. Though our foes' initial count had been ten thousand strong, they were dropping like flies. With my rebels and the Terran line hounding them, the automatons began a hasty retreat. The disbelief over the Yotul's showing was palpable on my bridge, and Arxur voices on the comms channels, chastising the marsupials for venturing off, had died down.

Kaisal looked astonished. "How could prey have come up with a new weapon? What are they even doing?!"

"I do not know, but I see that the humans have not led us astray with their chosen reinforcements," I remarked. "Olek, Lisa, can you offer any insight on this development?"

Olek whipped around, with his signature "I knew it" grin on his face. "Particle-beam weapons! This is what the death ray that melted the Grand Gulf reactor was; I looked into the proof a ton. We've had them since *1989*. Charge up in a particle accelerator, shoot quantum shit at near light speed, and voila!"

"Olek is off in crazy land again, but he's right about what it is, according to my contacts," Lisa sighed. "The Yotul worked closely with the UN on their shipbuilding, and apparently, were able to make a feasible ion cannon. Unlike lasers, a particle beam can't be reflected, and even with shields up, the charged particles disrupt the current."

Kaisal relaxed his posture. "I see. It is a human development that you gave the prey, because you do foolish things like that."

“We worked hand-in-hand on this, just like…you know who we worked in tandem with, when we came up with shield disruptors? The Yotul. They’ve been excellent, not only to bounce ideas off of, but to expand on what we give them.”

Perhaps these herbivores are more capable than any of us assumed. Humanity always had an ability to see a species for what they really are. It is remarkable; this makes taking Mileau much more feasible!

With less worry bogging down my heart over the Arxur lives that would be lost in the battle, I ordered our vessels to press the advantage. The Kolshians had given up fending off the Terrans they’d been stalemated with, and were getting overrun as they retreated. The Yotul took a few hits, despite their crafty countermeasures, but their particle beams also rendered missiles lobbed at them useless. More than once, I saw warheads erupt well before their intended target, picked off like syasaras in a riverbank. The particle accelerators didn’t seem to have the cooldown requirement that standard plasma weapons did either.

The Kolshians fired off parting shots, as their numbers dwindled; few enemies had escaped the Yotul’s invisible net, with their ships disabled within seconds. Our weapons station was scouring for stragglers, and I saw our gunners take some iffy shots in the hopes of scoring kills. The Arxur vessels had been outshone, though our sheer numbers helped to clean up any remaining foes. However, there was still a chance to test our prowess by Mileau itself. I wouldn’t expect the resounding success we’d had against the battle line, now that particle beams weren’t a surprise. Still, with my thirteen thousand ships and the Terrans’ long-present drones, there was a good chance we could come out ahead.

“There’s forty thousand ships total,” I announced. “So there’s loads more waiting at Mileau’s heart, and foot soldiers occupying the land. Let’s go hunt them down.”

Kaisal issued an awkward tail lash. “Er, what should we say to the Yotul, sir?”

“I’ll handle it.” I switched on my microphone, tuning into the joint comms for a brief second. “This is Chief Hunter Isif. I wanted to congratulate the Yotul Technocracy on a well-fought battle; might I add, we are delighted that you are on our side.”

A few barks of laughter came in response. “So much for being

primitives that are beneath the wider galaxy. The Yotul will never be mocked or taken for granted by anyone, after today! We'll lead the way to Mileau."

"You deserve to champion the hunt. I shall be quite pleased when the Dossur are fully liberated, and only then, but I wished to acknowledge your display of acumen. Good fortune."

I switched off my transmitter, and did a brief survey of my bridge team. There had been a handful of grumbles, when I agreed to let the herbivores lead, but it was the Arxur way for the strongest to take charge. I disliked that the newcomers to the galaxy already had a leg up on my fleet, though I didn't expect Zhao to work so closely to provide us weapons; the waters were muddied, in terms of any relations between humanity and us. We couldn't afford to be complacent anymore. A new goal of the rebellion needed to be what the Yotul and the Terrans had achieved: bringing together scientists that could innovate and grow our technology.

We did it once, before science was a distorted field and we were steered toward a forever war. Giznel didn't want us to get stronger, but I wish to see us victorious. Technology could be a key field in helping us best the Dominion…if we can't get the Terrans' help soon enough.

My ragtag band of rebel ships mobilized behind the Yotul craft; the detachable, blocky layers the marsupials had sported were gone, but having lost only a few dozen ships, I trusted them to find new ways to stay effective. Kaisal was busy combing sensors, as Olek turned the focus of the comms array to broadcasts from the planet. I squinted at the scruffy human, whose expression had shifted in an instant. Knowing we had time before reaching the system's heart, I wandered over to his station to peek at his viewing materials.

"What is this issue, Olek?" I asked.

The human pursed his lips. "Sir, the Dossur are claiming they have control of their broadcast channels again. The Kolshians packed up shop and just…left the occupation, with quite a few local prisoners in tow. Apparently, they targeted troublemakers."

Lisa cleared her throat, while absent-mindedly fiddling with her brown locks. "I'm hearing the same thing. My UN contacts are telling me that the local government re-established contact, and that they're being apprised of Ambassador Alar's decision to join the Sapient Coalition."

“I see. The Kolshians are fleeing, surrendering the planet, and acknowledging they lost?” I hissed. “That is excellent news! Felra will be pleased. There’s not much we can do about the Dossur prisoners, but there’s no way the enemy can initiate a total evacuation and vacate the system before we get there. Perhaps the Yotul can disable and board the prisoner ships, and—”

“Sorry to interrupt, but that’s the thing, sir. It seems they started making preparations to leave, and…*left,* days ago,” Olek mumbled.

Kaisal smacked his tail on the floor. “I’ve adjusted the sensor settings, and observed the breadth of the planet’s spaceports on the viewport, at maximum magnification. There’s not a trace of any Kolshian ships left here, sir. I can detect some subspace trails, suggesting they left within the hour. Mileau is free.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That does not make sense. They started leaving days in advance of our arrival; the Kolshians would not have expected a thorough trouncing. It must’ve been some ulterior motive, yes?”

“The fact that they continued to hold us at bay is telling,” Lisa mused aloud. “They didn’t want us to know they were gone; we’re only picking up communications now, so the drones were jamming various channels. Why keep up the illusion, unless you don’t want humanity to know your thirty thousand ships have relocated?”

Olek’s brown eyes widened with realization. “Holy shit. They left because they were given orders to attack somewhere else. The question is, where have they gone?”

“I haven’t a clue, but I suggest we relay a warning to the United Nations.” My head turned toward Olek, and the human seemed to pick up on the message to open a channel. “Your intelligence may have a better idea of this, yes? It is also your jurisdiction how to proceed, with Mileau freed; Zhao will wish to hear of our success.”

“Already on it, sir. Give me a moment.”

I did my best to avoid crowding the male human, though I was impatient for him to pass me along to the Secretary-General. With this new information in mind, there were decisions to be made about what roles the rebel fleet should play. From what Kaisal imparted, we had just missed intercepting the Kolshians; since they had warped out mere hours before, we could follow the subspace

trails and see where they led. The goal of this mission was already accomplished, with Felra's world liberated, but I was torn over whether to intervene. Zhao's words from our conversation about the war plans were still fresh on my mind.

Should the tables turn at Mileau, I imagine the Kolshians are biding their time to hit human territory. We know they want to cure us, so I'd find the use of biological weapons against a civilian populace likely, the Secretary-General had said.

The last thing that Earth wanted was a repeat of the months-long hostage situation in this system, but with human prisoners in tow. Regardless of what actions I would personally take, I needed to pass along a warning about Zhao's speculation looking more like prophecy. Perhaps the death of Nikonus had accelerated the Kolshians' aggressive timeline, or perhaps his successor carried out what was already planned. Either way, Venlil Prime and Earth should be on their guard for any incursions. I donned a look of seriousness, as Olek beckoned me over to the screen. The Secretary-General was staring back with interest in his brown eyes.

"Hello, Isif. I hear your mission at Mileau has been a massive success. I've been in touch with the Zurulians, and their doctors and aid workers are en route from Colia," Zhao said. "However, I'm hearing that the Kolshians left before your arrival."

I chuckled. "As usual, you know things before they have been relayed; General Jones' department, yes?"

"In this instance, it was simple enough to piece together a timeline of events, with Mileau able to reach out to us. We've been in communication with our people aboard your ship too. Regardless, congratulations on your success; there are many bright-eyed humans toasting your accomplishments back here on Earth. The United Nations appreciates your help…we would've sent more to fight alongside you, but we're stretched thin."

"I know, Mr. Secretary-General. I'm not sure I ever misjudged someone so thoroughly as I did the Yotul; you sent us worthy fighters. That was enough aid, and it pains me to profess, but it was the reason for our success. I wished to get in contact to apprise you of these developments, and also to warn you that the Kolshians may have left to attack another target. It should be seen to that Venlil Prime, Earth, and anywhere else that is strategically important to

humans is vigilant."

"I swore a promise that 'not one more' civilian would perish on Earth—not under my watch. Twenty percent of the deaths during the attack were in my home nation. I lost family, like many other people, and for that, I will do *anything* to protect Earth. I have done everything I could think of to protect Sol, and there are no lines I wouldn't cross to keep us safe. Skalga is also under our umbrella of protection; the Venlil are treasured by humanity. You need not worry."

"Good. I do not know whether I should pursue the Kolshians, and offer aid."

Zhao's eyes, which had darkened during his previous remarks, rolled back in thought. "Isif, you've done as much as you promised to do. I won't ask any more of you; if you wish to help, we'd welcome your assistance, and your swift response time could make a difference. The Yotul have already agreed to chase the subspace trails, and continue the battle wherever the Kolshians have gone. What course of action do you wish to pursue?"

"That depends on where they are attacking. Do you have any guesses?"

"I…have a sneaking suspicion, but I genuinely have no desire to manipulate you. Please, whatever my colleagues might do, know that I respect your goals and autonomy."

"You are blunt and forthright with your aims. I find that to be a respectable quality in most instances, except when your aims are perpendicular to my own. Fortunately, we find ourselves in agreement for our peaceful aspirations, is that not correct?"

"We both seek a long-lasting peace, for all species. First off, I don't *know* this; it's based off my interpretation of the data. My best guess for where the Kolshians are heading is *Liberty's Bastion*, since to the Federation, it symbolizes 'predator expansion' outside our own space." The human's words caused my heartrate to spike, hearing that my Dossur friend was in the line of fire again. "To be clear, I've asked for the Mazic patrollers to fortify our defenses, and we're moving colonists off-world. Now, before you worry about Felra, I got in touch with her hosts and evacuated them. You don't need to swoop in and rescue her."

“Why would you bring my friend to safety, before tending to your people?”

“Felra doesn’t take a spot from a human. She’s tiny, she can fit in a cupholder.”

“You could’ve left the Dossur there, and manipulated me into helping. It would benefit you strategically.”

“I don’t want to win that way, or to treat humanity’s *friends* as tools. Like I told you on Earth, moral principles give you integrity, but you can’t just hold onto them when it’s easy or beneficial. I won’t abuse emotions or use lives as bartering chips.”

Remarkable. Zhao could’ve all but ensured that I would show up at Liberty’s Bastion, but he chose to get Felra to safety. The Dossur means a lot to me, so perhaps I do owe him a favor in return.

I dipped my head in gratitude. “Thank you. I’ll have my fleet follow the subspace trails with haste. We’ll chase the Kolshians to *Liberty’s Bastion* or wherever they may be heading.”

“Your aid is appreciated. I promise I’ll remember this, when it’s time for us to bring our full might to your side. You may not be a member of the Sapient Coalition, Isif, but you’re just as much of an ally.”

“I desire for you to win. I desire for the Federation to lose even more.”

“Where I’m from, we call that spite. We’ll bring their leaders to their knees before the sun sets on this war. There’s no stopping what’s in motion now.”

“I have faith in your abilities. I will be in touch if we have additional intel, or if we need to converse with UN forces at our destination. Take care, and fight well, Secretary-General Zhao.”

“Just Míngzé is fine. We’re friends. You called Elias by his first name, didn’t you?”

“Actually, I referred to Elias Meier as the sum of his two full names. Human nomenclature is most confusing to the uninitiated.”

The Terran general chuckled. “I see how it could be confusing. Regardless, I won’t waste anymore of your time; I know you’ve got to be present while you track those assholes down. Take care and fight well yourself.”

The arboreal alien disconnected from the call, and I swept a gaze around the bridge. While I was certain the Arxur crew had overheard the bulk of our conversation, there didn't seem to be any objections over following the Kolshians. We were fortunate to escape Mileau with few casualties, largely thanks to the Yotul stepping up. However, we didn't want to be outshone by plant-eating marsupials, who were willing to come to Earth's aid as often as needed. My goal was to make a positive impression on the United Nations, and I also could respect that they had taken the honorable road with Felra. Altruism was a novel concept, but it was worth it to attempt to reciprocate the kind gesture.

The rebel fleet pressed closer to Mileau's inner sanctum, and we locked onto the subspace trails left by the fleeing Kolshians. Wherever the Federation planned to strike, my forces would help prevent them from getting their tentacles on any other humans. If there was one thing the Terrans had in common with my entire race, it was that we both had no interest in being "cured."

Chapter 148

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 7, 2137

The auburn hair, cut just above her shoulders, was all I could see while staring intently at the back of Samantha's head. The "Aussie" UN guard was brewing her daily cup of coffee, a routine I'd observed for multiple days. I had a perfect plan to spur her into action, when she turned around; my analysis of human behavior was conclusive on exactly what poked their buttons. The Terran turned around to find a Yotul hovering behind her, and I struck a pose as soon as her jade-green gaze narrowed. I tilted my head, ensuring that my eyes stretched as wide as possible. My ears slanted inward enough to touch, and my tail wagged in half-hearted motions.

"The fuck are you doing?" Samantha hissed. "Not even using your words? You want coffee, brew your own! You know how."

I emitted the whine of a wounded animal, and lowered my head in the saddest way possible. My eyes shifted upward briefly, gauging the human's reaction.

"I'm not doing it, you lazy…fuck!" The human waved a dismissive hand at me, and crossed her arms. "Try to manipulate me with the puppy dog face. Unbelievable! I'll tell you this once; you're playing a dangerous game, mate."

I struggled to maintain my act. "Coffee? Please? I have to strain on my hind legs because of your counter height—"

"I'll get you a bloody stepstool to stand on, but I'm not making it for you. Who taught you this? Knock it off, 'cause you're not getting coffee out of it."

"Hey, c'mon!" A tall soldier with angular features pointed a hand at me; I vaguely remembered his name as Frank. "Give the space capybara some coffee. You're making him sad."

"Fuck no. You're so keen on it, then *you* wait on him hand and foot."

Sensing that I had a new mark, I wagged my tail happily and started bouncing up and down. Frank pressed a hand to his heart,

cooing at me. A disgusted Samantha stomped off, carrying her own coffee to an empty table. There was a hint of a smirk on her lips, though she attempted to mask it. I flicked my pupils in the direction of the machine, and returned to shameless begging. It was mind-boggling how easy it was to influence the so-called predators; smug satisfaction filled my chest as the newcomer hopped to it.

“Aw, you poor thing. That mean lady didn’t want to share, but Uncle Frankie’s got you.” The aroma wafted into the air as it brewed, and I could already feel the pick-me-up working its way through my bloodstream. “Do you want sugar, cupcake?”

I imitated a human nod, in case he turned around. “Please.”

“Okay. Uh, what else do we got for the precious here…non-dairy creamer?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Any time! Lordy, you’re adorable as those Gojid kids. It’s not fair.”

My mask slipped for a half-second, wondering which Gojid kids Frank was talking about. Had he been on the ground during the cradle’s fall? Regardless, I couldn’t afford to get too chatty, given that I slated to help out with maintenance soon; I loved tinkering with machines, and there were always minor repairs and calibrations needed during transit. It was an extra duty I was happy to volunteer myself for. The computer had alerted us to a nanometers wide-hull breach, right beneath the drive core. It could weaken the load-bearing structure if left unchecked, and unfortunately, that area of the ship was only accessible from the outside.

By the time we stop outside Kolshian borders and await orders, I need to be ready to venture out on a little spacewalk. It’ll be wonderfully quiet.

Frank poured the coffee into a disposable cup, stirred a packet of sugar into it, and then dispensed a helping of creamer to make it taste more like a treat. The Terran slipped the drink into a sleeve so I wouldn’t burn my paw pads too. My begging act ended the second it was transferred into my grasp; I scurried off after a brief ear flick of acknowledgment. What else could I get humans to do with that routine? Outside of my areas of interest, there were quite a few tasks I’d be delighted to shirk. This was an eye-opening discovery that I needed to experiment with further.

“Proud of yourself, you little rascal?” Sam grumbled, as I approached her table. “Didn’t even tell the guy thanks.”

I slurped down a mouthful of the coffee. “An ear flick *is* thanks.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll be telling Tyler about this juvenile stunt. It’s not acceptable behavior—”

“I think me taking advantage of humans being suckers is more acceptable than Sovlin inventing new forms of racism.”

The Terran snorted. “Point taken. I still think you’re a jackass.”

“No, I’m a Yotul.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.”

“Hmph. I guess this is as good as alien interaction gets—a mutual volley of ‘fuck yous.’”

“We created a nice bonding ritual here. But on a more serious note, I was surprised to see you returned for this stint. Carlos seemed more attached to Sovlin than you, yet you’re both along for the ride.”

“I don’t dislike Baldy, but I didn’t tag along for him. Melbourne doesn’t exist anymore; I have nothing to return to. I’m here ’cause it’s all I got, hunting the Kolshians down. Carlos is the one who probably came out of loyalty, maybe even brotherly love for Sovlin…and he’s also the one you should’ve pulled your coffee begging act on.”

“That might be a good idea, er, if Frank’s not around. I got a feeling he won’t mind helping out again.”

Samantha rolled her eyes, sipping at her coffee at a leisurely pace. Meanwhile, I began chugging my latte with gluttonous energy; her binocular gaze shifted to the droplets dripping off my chin. The human shook her head in disappointment. I gulped down the last of my drink, and slammed the empty cup down. The female primate wordlessly passed me a napkin, which I used to clean my snout. Peacekeeper Harris seemed to be biting back a comment on my table manners.

I pitched my trash into a wastebin. “Just out of curiosity, Sam, how close was my begging to working?”

“That will never work on me,” the human muttered.

“Why not? I thought I got the pitiful eyes down pat. You want to see it again?”

“Fuck no. Scram, Onso. You *did* feel us drop out of warp, huh? Go be useful.”

I gave an innocent wave, and Samantha purposefully turned her body away from me. Chuckling to myself, I skipped from the rec room to the nearest airlock. It took some persistence to wriggle into the Yotul spacesuit; with multiple Sapient Coalition species among the ship’s crew, the United Nations carried vac suits tailored to each race listed aboard, with at least a few spares in case of defects. I pulled up a small readout on my wrist, syncing it to my holopad. A beacon showed the exact location the computer had given for the breach, so that just left ejecting to the ship’s exterior to complete the repairs.

I ran through the required visual 360 to ensure that no other people were within the airlock, before sealing the compartment. Various tools were already affixed to my belt, but I did the diligence of triple-tug-checking the tether hooked onto it as well. Once all items were confirmed to be secure, I held my paw over the atmosphere catch button. After the hatch cycled, I gave myself a slight push into the starry expanse; my suited form drifted over the body of the ship in the drive’s direction. It was a short glide, and the handholds distributed along key paths could steer me if additional momentum was needed.

I relished the feeling of weightlessness, surveying the serene panorama out of my periphery. My sense of utter insignificance blossomed, with only a few layers of fabric between me and the everlasting void. There was only the faint glimmer of distant starlight, rendering the metal of the ship’s hull a shadowy slope. Its entire length stretched for over a hundred meters, leaving plenty of space for humans to tuck powerful weaponry. I’d chosen an airlock a short distance away from the drive compartment on purpose; it was best not to waste thruster gas or oxygen, in case it was needed in a future emergency. Tapping the microphone button on my wrist readout, I transmitted a message back to the ship.

“I’m thirty seconds out from the repair site. This will be patched in no time,” I said.

Samantha's voice filtered into my helmet. "Copy that, Onso. I'll stay on this frequency and be waiting outside the airlock, as requested. Just don't expect a picnic lunch when you return."

"Pretzel sticks and a jar of peanut butter will do."

"Well, you got two perfectly good legs, and you fucking know where to find whatever food your conniving heart desires. Now get off this channel, 'less you got any official business."

"Right, right. Well, I officially want—"

"*Off.*"

I tugged on my tether, slowing my glide and directing myself toward the source of the hull breach. It was nearly impossible to see with the naked eye, but the above-expected dip in ship oxygen levels substantiated the computer's findings. A moment's inspection identified the breach, which revealed itself as a subtle line of differently-colored metal. I popped the can of sealant off my belt, causing it to float up slightly; it had its own tether attaching it to my suit. After filling the microscopic hole, I covered it with a colored patch that fused itself into the hull. The simple handiwork solved the problem without a hitch, until we could seek a thorough repair. I tugged on my tether, propelling myself back toward the airlock.

It was rare that spacewalks were necessary for repairs, since most areas were accessible from the interior. However, issues in general were becoming a common experience during our voyage. This warship had seen significant wear-and-tear, so even with Earth's desperation for artillery, I wondered if the United Nations would retire it soon. This hasn't come close to a worst-case scenario. When unrepairable damage was sustained during combat, sometimes entire compartments had to be sealed off; I was pleased that my initiative had saved us from taking such steps. My paw drifted to the microphone button on my wrist, tempted to jab Samantha with my status report.

I shouldn't have said the word pretzels aloud. I was joking, but now I actually want them. They are *good gaming food, if we'll stay put here long enough for a session with Tyler.*

My nostrils twitched with amusement. "Hey, Sammy—"

Surprisingly, the human didn't cut me off to strike down that

nickname. “Onso, get back here *now*. Whether the repairs are done or not!”

“Already moving. What’s wrong?”

“Energy signatures out of nowhere. Bastards must’ve predicted our course, and that we’d stop before the disruptor buoys. I think they powered down their fucking ships and parked ’em outside their own territory. You know, to ambush us, ’cause there’s hostiles practically right next to us! You don’t wanna be out there if we—”

“Have to take evasive maneuvers or get hit. I got it, and I was already heading back.”

“Double time it, you crazy fucking marsupial. I’ll be right here.”

I powered up my jet thrusters, accelerating my movement toward the airlock. With visibility no longer being an issue for stealth reasons, given that the Kolshians were already upon us, our warship powered on bright exterior lights to illuminate nearby hostiles. One beam struck the hull of a foe, which was gliding adjacent to us at minimum power emissions; they’d snuck into position without attracting attention! Rather than striking us down, they appeared to be preparing to insert a boarding party; their craft latched onto our exterior before my watching eyes.

I hated the Kolshians, but I couldn’t deny it was a bold move to board a human ship. That would, at the least, catch the primates off their game. The United Nations had shown they could adapt under pressure; however, the shadow fleet’s foot soldiers had yet to clash with Earthling forces. While the Terrans were skilled against other foes, it was unknown how they stacked up against trained Kolshians or how well they could defend their warships from intruders. I needed to get inside, obtain a weapon, and ensure that I wasn’t separated from the other troopers. I sucked in a sharp breath, seeing the airlock come into view.

“Sam, it’s me. Open the door, now!”

I turned my shoulder inward, and hurtled toward the still-shut inner door. I braced myself to slam into it at high-velocity, though I knew obtaining injuries in a clunky spacesuit wasn’t ideal. Mercifully, my tail latched onto a pawhold, halting my momentum; I could see the whites of Sam’s eyes through the window slit to the control room. As the outer airlock clicked shut on her command, artificial gravity

returned to the room. I rolled onto the floor for a rough landing, feeling the definite stings of new bruises taking root. Adrenaline helped me bounce to my feet without slowing, and I rushed to shed the suit.

Samantha unsealed the inner compartment, and shoved a sidearm into my grasp. “Take it. We need to work our way back to a chokepoint, or if all else fails, hole up in the bridge with the officers and a security detail. Let’s go, Onso, *now*.”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” I panted, spilling out of the suit like potatoes tumbling from a sack. “What if we get cut off from the core of the ship?”

“Then we’re on our own. Every soldier had orders to fall back; hell, the fucking ship might be put on lockdown…and we’d be stuck.”

“Why did you wait for me? You should’ve saved yourself.”

“I don’t usually leave my squadmates behind—not if I like ’em, anyway. It is what it is. We move out and we deal with it.”

Samantha didn’t wait for further questions, jogging down the hallway to the rec room. I recalled exactly where the Kolshian soldiers’ insertion point had been; since I’d sized them up while returning toward the airlock, I knew enemies would be found in the direction we were heading now. It might serve us to reverse course, but given our orders, it could leave us stranded from our comrades. The key points for the United Nations to hold were the bridge controls and the armory; everything else could be sealed off to avoid any funny business. The warp drive, as was obvious during my spacewalk, was inaccessible from the inside.

Sparks were visible further down the corridor, the telltale sign of the Kolshians scorching an incision into the hull. Samantha crouched behind a table for a moment, weighing her options. The human and I were up against an entire boarding party, and I knew that ended with both our brains splattered on the wall. There wasn’t time to book it past the entry point before they made it inside. The UN soldier also opted to fight another day, slinking back in the direction we’d come. I had no idea how we could hope to make it out in one piece, other than attempting to dodge Kolshian sweeps.

How good at stealth and hiding are humans? I’ve read a bit about guerrilla warfare, but I don’t think hit-and-run tactics work in close

quarters combat.

The primate and I ducked around a corner past the airlock compartment, and the clang of the wall coming down echoed behind us. From the footsteps I heard clashing with the floor, there must've been dozens of Kolshians; it was unthinkable to peek back and find out for certain. I warred with my nerves, as it sank in that we were cornered and hopelessly outgunned. It'd always been my impression that Tyler and I would have each other's backs, but now, I just hoped my buddy was safer than I was. It was a fair assumption he was holed up in the bridge with the other officers.

I needed to survive on my own, if nothing else, as a "fuck you" to everyone who called the Yotul primitives. That was the Kolshians' rhetoric, and I wasn't going to let them put me down like the animal they thought I was. A sharp-witted human like Samantha might scrounge up some options for us; I shuddered to think what would happen to her, if the boarding party was able to capture a "predator" alive. Mileau's cured Earthlings were experimented on, and had their central nervous systems drugged to senselessness just like me. I wouldn't wish that existence on my worst enemy.

My grip became more secure on the firearm, and resolution took over my mind. If there was no escape for me, I planned to go down fighting instead of submitting to a fate of that sort. With any luck, the Terrans would figure out a way to clear the intruders from our warship before it came to such a drastic ultimatum. The push toward Aafa certainly hadn't started off as humanity intended.

Chapter 149

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 7, 2137

Samantha Harris had the bright idea to try to set up as many traps as possible, and also suggested silencing our electronic devices. The last thing we needed was to receive a communique from our officers that tipped the Kolshians off to our position; humans might be excellent marksmen, but they weren't able to take on a solo mission against fifteen enemies, regardless of what their video games might suggest. That was a power fantasy if I'd ever seen one, rather than a plausible demonstration of their actual abilities. As for myself, the hasty Yotul training that I'd received had been enough for me to hit a target down-range with a firearm. It'd served well on Sillis, but that had been a different scenario from close-quarters combat.

"Do you think the others are safe on the bridge?" I messaged Sam over our text comm-link.

The human's green eyes turned toward me for a moment, before she typed a response. "Sovlin's racism is so thick that it'll keep the squids out."

I shoved my paw into my mouth, muffling my laughter. It had once been offensive how derogatory that Gojid was toward Yotul, humans, and many other species, but I'd realized by now that bigotry was embedded into his every waking thought. Not that I'd wish for Sovlin to be in grave peril, isolated from the rest of the crew, but I almost wished the heroic captain was at my side. He was a renowned strategist capable of routing the Arxur with a Federation crew, and his bullheadedness rendered him defiant in combat. Short of Tyler having to watch my back, I would've felt more serenity with someone I'd been in ground action with before. Sam was a competent soldier, but I couldn't predict her moves or her strengths.

Likewise, she has no idea about how I react during bullets-flying scenarios. It was noble of her not to leave me behind, but I'm sure she has mixed feelings about only having a herbivore at her side. I'll have to prove that I'm not dead weight all over again.

Thinking about what my best contributions would be, I tapped into the ship's security feeds so we could keep tabs on our enemy's movements. The Kolshians had split into two teams, with the smaller contingent sweeping the corridors away from the bridge. The hostiles were wearing envirosuits, so venting the atmosphere was rendered ineffective. Sealed bulkheads had come down outside the central areas, which would take significant time to cut down; those were designed to contain fires, or to keep out intruders. In our central hub, I could see the bridge personnel by the officers toting high-powered rifles, as well as Tyler, Carlos, and Sovlin in deep conversation by the sensors station. I hoped they weren't plotting anything too nonsensical, but that wasn't my concern right now.

Machines and technology were my specialization, so it occurred to me that I could tap into the automated weaponry built into the vessel. I didn't want to step on toes, if our commanding officers were planning to commandeer the fortifications to their directives, but I knew I could allocate those resources to my advantage. Assuming I received permission, the guided turrets and wall-mounted defenses could be turned against any encroaching enemies. Samantha was waving at me to hurry, so I fired off a typo-ridden message to the comms station as I ran.

The Terran shoved me through an open maintenance access panel, then began spilling liquid across the floor. Peacekeeper Harris had snatched a massive jug of water meant for the coffeepot, back at the kitchen, and was now using it to coat the floor in life-giving fluids. Was her idea of a trap to make the ground slippery? As amusing as it would be to see the Kolshans losing their footing, that was a minor annoyance at best. I could see the telltale wicked smirk on her face, however, and decided to trust her machinations. If anyone could make the basic elements of carbon-based life deadly, it was a human.

"Permission granted, Onso, and good luck," the comms station had transmitted in response to my request. "Utilize the resources near your location for any tactical advantage. Neutralize as many enemies as you can. The defense we're mounting will focus on the area around the bridge; the United Nations cannot afford to lose control of a nuclear-armed warship."

This would be an excellent way to make it look like humanity was attacking innocent worlds, or that they were behind any other manner of

atrocities, I realized. *Is that why the Kolshians are boarding us? Ralchi, they could try to fly in to Leirn or Skalga under the UN banner.*

This ship had to go down before we allowed those monsters to have our resources at their disposal. Even if they didn't have anything so devious in mind, capturing a Terran craft for study would give them an edge at reverse-engineering our latest advancements. It could also tip off some features of the Yotul vessels that we'd just raised from our shipyards. Suddenly, this mission had become less about forging ahead toward Aafa, and more about keeping our toys out of Kolshian possession. As much as I loathed those bastards, I couldn't deny this ambush was a clever way to turn the tables.

"Dammit, we need more," Samantha growled to herself, nigh inaudible, as the water ran dry. "If you've got admin access to the right functions, Onso, trip the fire suppression system."

I swiped at my holopad, abandoning the camera view for a moment. "Done. You know, I love the ocean, but creating one inside the ship seems ill-advised."

"So dramatic. Acting like it's some torrential downpour that'll flood the whole craft."

"Well, drowning's pretty much the only lethal use for water. If that's not it, then fill me in on your plan?"

"Or what? You'll give me puppy dog eyes?"

"Maybe. It could be my new resting face."

"You have fun with that. You'll never crack me. Now cut the chatter."

The human ducked into the maintenance shaft, and resealed the panel. Deciding to humor her request, I turned the fire sprinklers to full blast. Samantha had already climbed atop a pipe, gesturing for me to join her; she whispered something about keeping my limbs out of the water. I was growing more skeptical about her plan by the minute, so I decided to work on my own options in case this didn't pan out. The primate fetched the emergency supplies from a box on the wall, pulling out a defibrillator and bottles of water. She uncorked the liquid and spilled it onto the floor, mixing with the small pool seeping beneath the panel.

I can't fathom what she's doing, so it's time to look for other avenues. There's no turrets by our current position, and there's Kolshians heading

our way.

The enemy likely would've swept any ducts or hiding spots regardless, but the water on the floor could tip them off to our presence at once. I balanced myself carefully on the pipe, where it was proving difficult not to crowd Samantha in the tight space. Her verdant eyes were glowing with delight, as well as a sense of pride. She peered over my shoulder at the camera feeds, tracking a group of about a dozen boarders as they drew closer. They had finished sweeping the airlock compartment, and were moving further down the hall toward us.

"Alright. Here goes nothing." Samantha dropped the electrode pads into the water, and waited for an opportunity to pounce. I finally got an inkling of what she was trying to do, but there was no time to strike down this folly. "Time to ride the lightning, fuckers."

As confused Kolshians waded through the wet floor, the UN soldier triggered the shock button on the AED. Nothing happened: the lifesaving device searched for a heartbeat signal and found none, preventing any shock from being rendered. Samantha scrunched her nose in confusion; I suspected the human anticipated more devastating consequences from the electric current. Amid a slew of muttered curses from Sam, the invading troops continued their search in progress, entirely unaware of the attempt. With the primate's plans yielding underwhelming results, I racked my brain for an alternative. A single holopad swipe led me back to the fire suppression system, where I workshopped the beginning of an idea.

Fire-fighting foam was still available for deployment, according to the computer. My best idea for a defensive measure was to deploy the goo in full force in this hallway sector. The substance was a novelty compared to Federation ships, which only had overhead sprinklers and manual extinguishers if further flame retardants were needed. I recalled how ill-equipped Yotul were to ward off blazes when I was a child; most roofs in Rinsa were thatched by our staple grain, eard, or by wetland grasses (reeds, as humans referred to them). Those dry materials were quite flammable, which led to an infamous fire caused by Ralchi's priests on Leirn's largest continent of Thysun.

The temples in Thysun were massive and superfluous; it was fitting that the twin villages of Kalstor and Pyora were both caught up in a

purification rite gone wrong, at the sacred ground that serviced both settlements. Our only technique to stop a blaze, prior to first contact, was using water pails kept on customary fire brigade hooks by our homes. Needless to say, that Ralchian ritual claimed dozens of lives and tenfold more buildings; it was only stopped via hasty demolition surrounding the inferno to starve it of fuel. The tragedy had been a humbling reminder of fire's raw power. If the humans devised something that could bury nature's exothermic killer—combustion that could claim entire neighborhoods—hoped it was good enough to encumber the Kolshians.

I quieted my nerves, seeking a clear mind before leaping into action. With a few succinct swipes, fire-fighting foam was bucketed atop our tentacled foes, like shaving cream falling from the sky. Genuinely, it looked reminiscent of the goop I'd seen Tyler lather his face with, before running sharp blades atop of it. Humans were strange in more ways than one, but chopping off their own hair down to the root was *special*. Most species preferred not to grow their fur in clumpy patches; if I shaved off the fluff on my snout, I'd look like I went sniffing around in a wood chipper…minus the smattering of green blood that would entail, of course. My whiskers twitched with amusement, holding onto that mental image of my reflection.

Sam bared her teeth with hostility. "What's so funny?"

Something told me it would be suicidal to answer honestly. I switched over to the camera view on my holopad to show her my handiwork, rather than passing along my views on human grooming. Copious amounts of foam were clumped atop Kolshian soldiers, dripping down their envirosuits. The bubbly spray encroached on the viewing strips for their bulbous eyes, blinding them; multiple enemies were pawing at their faces, struggling to wipe it away as more kept coming. I silently slid the maintenance panel open, and pressed myself flat on my stomach. This was as good of an opportunity as we'd get, this far away from the automated defenses.

The primate also pressed herself prone on the ground, assessing her own target with her depth-perceiving eyes. My immediate assessment of distances was nowhere near a human's level, but it was good enough to get the job done. Focusing one eye down the sights of my pistol, I fired a shot into an enemy's center of mass.

Samantha's synchronized bullet burst through another Kolshian's stomach like a xenomorph (a creature Tyler had giddily taught me about), spraying chunks of organs and violet blood onto a nearby compatriot. My breathing was purposeful and concentrated, as I calculated my every move.

Don't let them catch their bearings. The enemy are caked in foam, unable to move fluidly or see where the shots are coming from. If they were other Federation soldiers, they would've already panicked.

I wheeled my gun toward another target, and fired an instinctual shot with steady paws. My aim wasn't perfect, but it was enough to rend the tip of its tentacle clean off; the Kolshian's gun clattered to the ground, without two arms to grip it. Trusting that the maimed enemy couldn't fire back in the next few seconds, I searched for my next mark. Samantha was popping off shots one after the other. I tried not to register the last enemy she had hit, who was missing a clean chunk from the side of his skull. Swallowing the nausea that rose in my throat, I staved off jitters enough to shoot yet another foe near their heart. Our enemies couldn't return accurate fire without a visual.

With our unconventional tactics, the Kolshians were falling into disarray; none of their training prepared them for a Yotul twisting a human fire suppression system for nefarious purposes. The few hostiles that were left standing turned their guns in the direction of the gunfire, but the blind shots went at what would've been chest height—slamming into the wall above the access panel. A pawful of enemies, in their blind attempt to return fire, fumbled off shots that hit friendlies between them and us. I dished off several shots in quick succession, and with my newest expansion of their dead and wounded, the dazed boarders chose to stumble backward down the corridor. Samantha poked her slender arm out from our crawlspace, lobbing bullets after the hastily-retreating, foam-drenched foes.

The human chuckled to herself. "You're one deranged, coffee-loving Yotul. I like you."

"I'm not deranged. My plan worked, while I think yours was made up by Tyler. Water is a poor conductor of electricity, so at low voltages, that was never going to be fatal," I rambled happily, swishing my tail. "To shock someone to death, you need the contact area to be a large portion of the body's total surface area—ooh, and

electricity entering through mucous membranes would also increase sensitivity."

"Have you been watching people get electrocuted and taking notes?!"

"No, I just think electrical currents are interesting. I understand more than most people think I do. I'm going to repeat this for the furthest planters in the fields—I'm a rocket scientist."

The primate ducked out of the maintenance shaft, wrinkling her nose at the corpses. "I'd treat you with the appropriate respect for that role if I hadn't seen you beg for food items multiple times today."

"Hey, you'd do it too if you could get away with it. I've seen you point at a remote on the other side of the couch and say that it's too far away."

"That's conserving energy…or just being comfy."

"That sounds an awful lot like 'lazy' to me. You know I'm right, because you've looked into your heart and seen it to be true. Now that we've settled that important matter, what's our next move with the eye placement police?"

"Ha, fuck, I guess that nickname fits the squids; assclowns can't even figure out directional eyes don't mean jack shit. Uh, next, we find a proper place to hole up. Something tells me those Kolshians won't be back, and I say we've done our part. It's time to let our friends take care of the rest."

"I'd say it is. If the two of us could take on a squad with our wits alone, our friends can handle themselves. You know, I could be sitting at home, napping next to a hensa or attending a stageplay right now. Leirn's being built back to something amazing."

"The Yotul do have less of a stick up your ass than other aliens. Leirn's great by the sole factor of not having the Feddies around anymore. And Onso, we all want to go home, free of this God-forsaken war, so let's not fuck this up in the final lap. I have faith that we'll drive these boarders out. We made fools of them, and we have to keep making fools of them all the way to Aafa."

My claws tightened around my gun, recalling my own outrage toward the Federation. "I'm just happy we've survived this bout up to now, with those numerical odds back there. After today, there's a

few less of those bastards out there to owe us that debt. Eventually, we're going to make every Kolshian that partook in, or helped with this shit, pay for their crimes against sapience. But here and now, I just want them the fuck off our ship."

"Damn straight, Onso. This *is* our ship. Nobody takes what belongs to humanity, and lives to tell about it."

"From now on, that shit's going to be true about the Yotul too. Nobody fucks with either of our species. Thank you for sticking with me out here, Sam."

The human grinned. "It's been a pleasure, brainiac."

Having thwarted the Kolshians' attempts to flush us out in the ship's furthest reaches, I could only hope that UN personnel holed up in the bridge had found a crafty way to defend their position. There were dozens of boarders intruding on our warship, and we couldn't relax our guard until every last one of them was taken out. Like Samantha and I found mutual agreement over, humanity had no intention of letting the enemy succeed with this takeover. The push to Aafa might be slowed, but it wasn't going to be halted on our watch.

Chapter 150

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 7, 2137

I was proud to serve among a multi-species crew, back in my days presiding over my own starship. The Federation had been the emblem of unity, the glue holding the galaxy together from collapse at the Arxur's claws. I didn't spend much time thinking about my own kind, until Vysith and Hunter both prodded me for stories on the vid-links today. With the lockdown on the ship, I probably shouldn't be dwelling on days long-gone and a now-obliterated planet. The truth was, I hadn't felt much like a Gojid since long before what happened to my family; I'd become detached from my culture through exposure to other species. That was ironic from someone who'd been at the right paw of the Prime Minister, wasn't it?

Writing it all off as depraved was easier, without the requisite to pass it along to my daughter. I'd been telling Vysith and Hunter about a Gojid holiday called Keilren, where the children would receive gifts left and buried by the "Spirit of Youth." A supposed aspect of the Protector that was really parents, preserving that feeling of mysticism for the kids. I'd taken painstaking hours to draw a map to a gift Hania wanted, a claw flute. I recounted digging on my paws and knees in the middle of the night, with my burrowing claws churning up red clay outside our settlement of Lirren Orchard. Hunter sarcastically asked if every town was named after orchards, before Vysith lashed him on the ear with her tail.

The town nomenclature was just as generic and uninspired as everything else Gojids named, though I didn't think a species with such a poor aptitude for naming stellar observatories had any right to judge. "Very Large Telescope?" Granted, humans at least *had* telescopes, which was more than Onso could say, but they could use a little humility. Regardless, I found my mind lingering on a culture I'd lost all interest in; the ancient Arxur, of all creatures, called Keilren a "delightful tradition." What madness was the galaxy coming to? How could I ever get past the lies and deceit to determine if there was any beauty in our culture?

Tyler jostled me, forcibly snapping me out of my stupor. “Yoo-hoo, Sovlin. We’re under attack, and we need to be alert once they get to the bridge. Quit sucking your thumb.”

“He doesn’t have thumbs,” Carlos chimed in, a second before I could snap the same line, “but he’s happy to suck on his claws. Think we should get him a pacifier?”

“I do. Every time he says ‘primitive,’ stick a pacifier in it.”

“Yeah, yeah. If you give me orders, I’ll get it done, sir.” I attempted to shake off the emotions stirred by my abruptly-ended video call; a not-insignificant part of me would have preferred to be with Hunter on Earth, acting as the father figure I missed being so much. I owed a debt of service to the Terrans, and I couldn’t let myself forget that I hadn’t earned sitting in a swaying chair on the porch. “Where’s the atavist?”

Tyler scrunched his nose, rubbing the region of his translator implant. “*A-ta-vist?* Must’ve plucked that from someone else’s feed, ‘cause I don’t know that word. Ahem…don’t tell me, Carlos, I’m consulting the good ol’ search engine.”

The male guard raised his tattooed arms innocently. “I believe you can figure this out on your own. You’re a big boy…sir.”

“Very big,” I agreed.

“Big enough to smack some sense into both your heads, mocking a superior officer.” Officer Cardona checked that the Kolshians hadn’t reached the bulkhead yet, then squinted at his holopad screen. His blue eyes widened with indignation, and he jabbed an accusatory finger at me. “‘A creature that has traits of a more primitive type of that organism.’ Did you seriously find a new word for primitive?!”

“I’m a learned man, Tyler. You might not know this about me, but I used to read Gojid philosophy. Now answer the question: *where’s the atavist*?”

“Use his fucking name. I don’t know where he is, and it’s a little worrying, but Onso must’ve reported to a closer chokepoint. Could use him on the sensor station; that kickass Yotul’s a damn fine wizard with tech stuff, according to everyone here but you. Not an a-ta-vist. *Pretentious* word for a *pretentious* Gojid. How’s that for a big word?”

“It’s a lot of syllables, for you,” Carlos chimed in.

“You’ve been spending too much time around Sam. You got no chill now! I just try and talk like a normal human being. Nobody sane uses words like that in conversation. I’ll give you two some orders; point your guns at the door in perfect silence, and think how lucky you are that your commanding officer is so forgiving.”

Humans are strange. It seems like they’re the most chatty and raucous in the moments right before danger.

“Whatever you say, sir.” I turned my expression serious, and tried to focus, despite wishing I could return to my off-duty call with Hunter and Vysith. My hatred for the Kolshians was a solid distraction, after seeing how they’d tormented so many species and held an entire planet hostage back at Khoa. “Do we have a plan to deal with them?”

The sandy-haired predator shrugged. “Shoot them all.”

“That’s a good plan.”

“I was hoping you’d say that too, sir. They’re fish in a barrel,” Carlos offered, with a metaphor that had darkly predatory implications. The male guard had always been sympathetic to me, so it was easy to forget how connected to hunting culture even a human like him was. “I doubt they’ve seen combat action before, and if they have been on some black ops mission, it wasn’t against a real enemy.”

“They made sure they neutered every other race in the galaxy. That ain’t helping them here. We’re not just gonna roll over like a dead cockroach. ’Sides, home field advantage is with us. We chop ’em all down, and we go look for Onso soon as the coast is clear,” Tyler said.

I turned my attention to the camera feeds manned by Terran comms technicians, who were relaying live information on the enemy’s location. The Kolshians had broken up into two teams, with the largest on a direct course to the bridge. Strange events were befalling the smaller group on a different display, who were bogged down in cartloads of foam. Some stealthy operatives must’ve gone off to spring this trap, and gun down the enemies who moved toward the rear of our vessel. Humanity wouldn’t want any area to go uncontested, even if it wasn’t of strategic importance; deep in their fighting spirit, it was still their territory.

The comms station was tracking the party en route to our location, and hounding them with devious machinations built into our walls. Turrets blazed as the Kolshians snaked around one corner, pumping a few soldiers full of holes before they could blink. The team ducked back to what they thought was safety, to have an automated gun roar to life from behind. It would be hilarious if they were picked off before they got here, even if Tyler had gotten me riled up to take them out. The enemy group found cover in a small storage closet, however, and set off EMP charges to prevent the massacre from worsening. Several bodies were sprawled on the floor, but the heartless bastards made no efforts to revive any comrades that couldn't move on their own.

I remember how I used to say the Arxur have no regard for life. That's true, at least with the monstrosities that they are today, but these Kolshians don't have a nurturing brain cell in their skulls either.

As my mind brought up my recollection of Keilren again, I wondered if I could be helping my daughter bury presents for her own children, had it not been for the Kolshians and the Farsul. All of the pain in the galaxy traced back to those meddling bastards, and the Aafa natives were here to perpetrate a further legacy of death and destruction. If they'd sabotaged a ship, killing my protégé Recel to make it look like humanity attacked their friends, how many prey lives would they sacrifice to point the claw at Earth? We were going to take this mission all the way to their homeworld, free Slanek, and return to a safer galaxy so I could help Hunter adjust to this century like I promised. I'd have no qualms killing as many of these emotionless monsters as possible.

The way I thought about predators before discovering humanity, I could see all those traits within the Kolshians, clear as day. There was no mercy or negotiating with them; they imposed their way and killed anyone they didn't have a viable use for. Maybe they disguised their brutality a bit more than the Dominion, but the manicured worlds they created were cattle pens just the same. Our lives, our suffering, and the blood we'd given to their cause meant nothing to them. My features hardened into a scowl, as my eager claw moved over the trigger. This wasn't only to help Marcel and redeem myself—it was personal.

"Hostiles moving across the walkway to the bridge," a comms technician barked. "They've got a blowtorch to cut through the

bulkhead."

My spines bristled from forceful rage, rather than fear. "Let them come. The walls will be painted violet by the time we're through with them."

"I've said it once and I'll say it again. We don't go down without a fight," Carlos agreed. "Not to a merciless enemy. These guys make a spectacle of basic sapient rights."

"I finally get it. Predators aren't monsters by default, and Gojids weren't either. We were just people."

Tyler gritted his teeth. "So were we. They can't fuckin' treat us that way, so I'll be damned if they get their filthy tentacles on this beautiful ship. Paint it purple, you racist old Gojid."

As the bulkhead's edges were melted to slag, the team of Kolshians kicked it over without hesitation. The humans had entrenched themselves behind cover, and found opportune angles to pick off anyone who attempted to make headway. An orchestra of bullets played across the bridge, as half of us saturated the single path into the command center with gunfire. The enemy rolled a grenade at us, but an audacious Terran rushed forward. He scooped it, and, utilizing his exemplary arm torsion tailored for stoning prey, he returned the explosive to its sender.

I watched the cartridge fly through the air at the panicked Kolshians, who were perhaps amazed by the perfect precision of the impromptu throw. While our enemies dove away from the returned explosive, it detonated in mid-air, impaling them with shrapnel. It was difficult to tell if the device was a copycat tool of Terran throwable weapons, or if it was another killing device that the conspiracy had concealed from other species. Simmering with wrathfulness, I trained my barrel right at where one enemy's heart allegedly was. The trigger was pulled within a second, and my aim was dialed in enough to strike true.

Reset and finish them off, Sovlin. There can't have been more than four dozen with this posse, and that was before the turrets and our defensive setup here struck them down.

The dazed Kolshians found their composure, and one crept forward with a cannon-like object; the grenade launcher was a weapon I'd only seen used by Terrans and by the Arxur before them. It

shouldn't surprise me that the tentacled bastards would replicate the Dominion's butchery tools. The humans attempted to pick off the threatening enemy wielding the weapon, but it was too late to prevent the incoming munition. The boarder had propped the launcher onto his shoulder, and hurled a shell in our direction as he fell. I tugged off an errant shot at our foes, before hunkering down at the sensors station.

Tyler and Carlos shielded their heads, fully hitting the deck in a short timeframe. We were fortunate the rocket wasn't bound for our station, but powerful explosives could still be devastating in close quarters combat. Beyond the risk to life and limb, the projectile could tear apart crucial systems; I hoped the Terrans had redundancies built into any key functions. As the shell cleared the doorway and connected with a barricade, a human security detail, just shy of the navigations station, erupted in flames. The sprinkler system was triggered, forcing the small pockets of flame to fizzle out. My ears rang from the shockwave, my fur was soggy from overhead water, and my stomach lurched as I saw mutilated, screaming predators still moving.

"You okay?" Tyler screamed, knowing I could hardly hear. All I could manage was imitating a human nod. "Keep it together. Get up. Shoot them!"

Carlos shook his head with vigor. "Fucking hell. Any closer, I think they'd have ruptured our eardrums. They're not pulling any punches."

"Neither are we. I want to see a KO—they shoulda never stepped into the ring. Put them on their ugly asses."

What the fuck is a KO? It doesn't matter, I guess. I have to do my part, so we lose as few innocent lives as possible. The Terrans deserve better than to lose any more good people to this needless war.

Bullets peppered the approaching Kolshians, as retaliation for the explosion in our midst. The enemy popped off quite the kinetics volley of their own too. I could feel one whisk by my ear, and see a handful of bullet holes marring the station. Shattering glass echoed behind me, as a holodisplay was taken out by the flurry of metal. I righted my rifle, not allowing myself to contemplate how close I was to metal slugs that could end my life. While I'd attempted to cease my self-hatred, I wasn't afraid to pay the ultimate penance on

humanity's behalf; that still wouldn't cover the sum of what I owed their species. My claw hooked around the trigger with practiced certainty, hitting an enemy with a gutshot.

Downing a single enemy could mean the difference between Tyler or Carlos catching a bullet. I watched the blond human taking his own measured shots, his binocular eyes hungry for a target. Carlos' bear tattoo was facing me as he inched forward for a better angle; in the chaos, it was tough to tell if he was responsible for any of the blood-spurting Kolshians. I popped off several shots in quick intervals, hoping to hit enemies with haste. The bridge was in disarray, with carnage in the fray's wake. Predator barks sounded through the air, calling to wounded comrades, alongside pained emissions from the enemy side.

Whoever can mop up the other side the quickest will be victorious. Right now, that looks like us, but we can't get lackadaisical.

The humans closest to the ravaged entrance had taken the most hits. Captain Monahan was behind a tactical map display with a sidearm drawn, a stern look on her face; she'd been consulting with tacticians and the comms station since the firefight began. They were prepared to mount a final stand, if our defenses failed. However, I could see various angles from our cameras the Terran staff were monitoring, which showed that few Kolshians had gone unscathed. Forward progress had proved tantamount to suicide, plunging headlong into our unyielding bullets. The walkway was being painted violet, with listless corpses splayed out in heaps.

The dead were becoming an obstacle to our enemy's motion into the bridge too, so they were forced to hang back and trade blows from afar. Humanity had the edge with depth perception, and also had fortifications to offer some refuge from the chaos. I was glad to be crouched on the far side of the sensors station's table; at least there was something between me and any munitions flying through the air. My own shots toward the discombobulated boarders were staccato pops, sent as soon as I could switch between marks. The screeches and yelps were becoming much stronger on the hostiles' end than ours.

With Kolshian ranks getting decimated, self-preservation was kicking in for the sparse survivors. The bullets shredding our walls had ceased, but the predators didn't slow down because of a lull in

enemy fire. If anything, our barrage became more energetic, determined to drive these raiders out of our ship. The humans were a merciful species, but this was the shadowy tentacle of a government that had spit in the face of their good intentions. There would be no restraint in finishing the job, and seeking retribution for their malevolence.

“Listen up! Not a one of them escapes, or becomes a stowaway on this ship!” Captain Monahan decreed. “It’s not enough that their insertion failed. We defend every piece of UN territory like it’s Earth—zero tolerance for attacks. Move! Comms station, keep us posted on enemy movements and escape attempts.”

The humans remaining intact on the bridge slunk off in search of fleeing combatants, while medics hurried toward our wounded to patch them up. Our warship had taken an internal beating from various explosions and projectiles, but it was still in our possession, and would be free of intruders soon. Tyler ventured off to the comms station on a detour, asking for information on Onso’s whereabouts. A strange look flashed on the blond officer’s face, before he hurriedly led us down the gore-riddled walkway. I consulted my own holopad, and found the Yotul closer to the maintenance airlock with Samantha. Was that atavistic marsupial the one responsible for the fire-foam massacre at the rear of the ship?

That makes no sense, but I guess that just checks the standard box for life among Terrans. Nothing is as it should be when I’m with these predators.

At the end of the day, I was glad that our posse had come through the mission’s first engagement without casualties. I’d grown to care for the alien soldiers I worked with, and I wanted to see Aafa’s fall alongside each of them. With the Kolshians’ bold-faced attempt to swing the war in their favor turning out as a miserable failure, I hoped it was a sign of what was to come.

Chapter 151

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: March 7, 2137

With election day drawing closer, the final debate could be crucial to winning over undecided voters; the polls were neck-and-neck. Veln was savvy with the mass appeal items on his docket, and I trusted that he would maintain his suave demeanor on stage before a live audience. While, at least before the arrival of humanity, I'd been regarded as personable, this venue would be playing into my opponent's forte. It was one thing to deliver organized speeches that Cheln curated, but no matter how much I rehearsed for expected questions, off-the-cuff replies and the head-to-head format of a debate weren't my strengths. So much was at stake for the fate of Skalga, so I needed to put on the best performance of my life.

Venlil debates were usually simple affairs, with a few minutes devoted to back-and-forths on each policy issue. However, with the human and Federation issues at the crux of the debate, Veln and I struck a mutual accord to devote the entire first half of the schedule to those topics. The other issues could be condensed, as this point was the true schism of this election. I knew how contentious our membership in the Sapient Coalition, and our close ties with Earth were; for would-be voters, everything else was unimportant compared to the millions of predators living among us. For the primates who'd been granted citizenship, attempts to have courts block their voting privileges had mixed success, from one jurisdiction to another. In this cycle, I couldn't rely on the Terran vote saving me.

I steadied my paws on the podium, and gazed out at the assembled crowd. Most non-pundit attendees were Venlil, though I could see a masked Noah sitting all the way at the back for moral support. The human noticed me looking at him, and raised a single thumb in a gesture I assumed was encouraging. I gave the slightest tail swish back, wishing I understood all of the Terrans' non-verbal cues. Their communication was so unique compared to other species, but they were expressive and animated if one knew what to look for.

This debate is nothing compared to Noah's speech on Aafa; I have no

right to be this nerve-wracked, when he was so brave with rifles trained on his face, trapped on a hostile world. If I can't sell Skalga on my love for humanity, I don't deserve to win.

Veln, as the challenger, mounted the stage second, relishing the crowd's cheers beneath a façade of *modest*, dismissive tail waves. His slate gray fur was perfectly smoothed out on his chest, while his tail had been puffed out for a regal appearance. His ears wiggled with enthusiasm, as he offered the audience a sweeping tail swish. My opponent wandered away from the podium, leaning down toward the first row to wave to a particularly-enthusiastic supporter. When I took the stage, my reception had been more mixed and tepid; my supporters were more the "stay the course" types than the gamechangers. Those who were against me, despised me—and hatred was something Veln could weaponize into passion for himself.

"Hello!" Veln said into the microphone, clearly studying me with a direct, side-on gaze. I'd kept my impassive composure, and swiveled an ear toward my rival with politeness. "It's an honor to have this opportunity to discuss my ideas in a comparative format with Governor Tarva. I do hope that we'll have an excellent, enlightening discourse!"

I flicked my ear in acknowledgment. "Likewise, I look forward to engaging with the pressing issues of our time. I believe that the candidate with the best ideas will rise in this format, and I'm grateful that so many of the voters are listening to what we each have to say tonight. Major decisions for the future of our society are at paw."

The Venlil moderator, a journalist named Jonek, straightened his notecards. "Now that the candidates are both here, let's launch into the issue on everyone's minds: humanity. Tarva, as the defending governor, you open this segment; thirty seconds for your reply. Why do you believe that your friendly policies toward Earth are ideal for Venlil society?"

"That's an important question, Jonek," I said, adding in a practiced pause. "We've seen the worst of what is out in the stars. The Arxur. The Federation, who've hidden their atrocities for centuries. Humanity came seeking genuine friendship, and have defended us on multiple occasions, at the cost of many of their own. We would

never have known what was done to us, *never* have woken up to our own manipulation without the so-called predators. Now more than ever, us Venlil need true allies and comrades, because how can we afford to be alone with so many threats out there?"

The crowd seemed pleased with my reply, issuing a few whistles of agreement. Noah mashed his meaty hands together, and gave the thumbs-up gesture again. I tried not to focus on the human for too long, not wanting to be caught staring at him on live television. With the first question done, I could feel myself begin to lighten up on the anxiety. Veln waited for the audience's response to cool off, before leaning toward the microphone. Moderator Jonek gave him the ear flick to go ahead with his thirty second rebuttal.

Veln pointedly trained both his pupils on me. "That's a wonderful set of lines, Governor, but it's not indicative of reality. If we need to entangle our society with humanity, and their values, to attain their friendship, then they are just as bad as the Federation. We have known them for the sum of a few *months,* so I would not bet the direction of the Venlil people on such a small sample size, and such limited knowledge. Terrans are not one entity with us, and we are not responsible for saving them. Under my leadership, we would seek more separation from the Earthlings, for the sake of our autonomy.

If I might add one more thing that doesn't add up? If you recognize the threat of the Federation, why have you placed us into a new one with many of their former members? We don't need to be beholden to anyone who wishes to determine our future and our choices for us. My slogan is very simple: No More Federations!"

I waited for his round of cheers to die down, signing "argue" in tail language to tell Jonek I wished for a counter-rebuttal. "Let me impart some thoughts of my own on 'reality.' The reality is, right now, we can't defend ourselves from the Federation on our own. My platform focuses on building up our military so that we can stand on our own, *without* leaving ourselves vulnerable to outside attacks. I lost my daughter to a raid, as the Arxur bombed schools—targeted children. I saw how furious that made the Terrans, so I know enough about them, even in this short time, to know that they'll stand fast beside us.

Veln, how do you expect the Venlil to stand a fighting chance,

alone? You think the Federation will just let us leave, or do you imagine they'll seize on our vulnerability to snuff us out and send a message to humanity. They'll do anything to get back anyone who helped the *predators*, or is important to them. We have no choice but to stick together; that's what the herd is for!"

Veln's ears straightened, sensing his chance to reply. "Since you asked, I don't think that asking others to solve our problems is the answer. Humans have a fundamentally different culture to us. I'm not proposing to fully go it alone; I'm proposing to be more responsible with the alliances and commitments we get ourselves into. Who out there helps carry the burden of predator refugees, or has had their child exposed to the sight of carcass food? We shouldn't accept this on Venlil Prime. A strategic alliance is fine, because Terrans are excellent at fighting, but we don't need to be joined at the hip—something I imagine you and Ambassador Noah know about."

"What is that supposed to mean?! Campaigning by starting unfounded rumors: it's unbecoming of someone who wants to lead an entire planet."

"Ah, I don't mean to insinuate anything, but you two spend a lot of time together outside typical work hours. I've seen him at the governor's mansion in a month more than any other species' ambassador visits in a year. Extraordinary circumstances, I know, but I think your judgment might be clouded. It's a conflict of interests if you're elevating human interests so highly, compared to Venlil priorities. Should I elaborate more? I want to make sure nothing is misconstrued, of course."

"I care deeply for Ambassador Noah, but I'm shocked that you would weaponize my empathy for how much he's endured, as the face of humanity, into a negative attribute. We've been through many stressful situations together, from nearly getting shot down en route to Aafa, to our efforts to stop the genocide of Earth, to working hand-in-paw with the cattle rescues that *my* government and his bargained for the release of, and now to our collaboration for the Summit! It's brought us both into a special and cherished bond, and I won't let you shame me for it."

Veln lashed his tail with smug satisfaction. "I'm only suggesting the people have a right to know about any *special bonds*. You make

decisions for all of us. The citizenry should be certain who you'd protect, if it came to us or them, and that certainty should be beyond a shadow of a doubt. I know I'd fight for our own. Regardless, I don't want to stall on this topic, moderator, so shall we move on?"

It was all I could do to conceal how much I was fuming on the inside; it was a clever way to lob a personal attack at me, and one that was difficult to defend. I was well-aware that the strongest criticisms against me were that humanity was pulling the strings on my agenda. Ever since I shut down the predator disease facilities on Terran urgings, my dissidents claimed that I wouldn't stand up to them. While I had a refutation prepared for that specific line, going after my ties to Noah wasn't an attack I wanted Veln to expand upon. Defending myself against a valid accusation left me with few options.

I'm not ashamed of how close I am with Noah, but what would happen if that got into the media? Glim, for one, was outright told we're together; I'm lucky he's working with me as a campaign advisor, or he could give Veln a juicy scoop. That rescue has been dispirited since fainting before Isif at the Summit.

Jonek read the second question on his card. "Veln. You've learned about the gene editing the Farsul forced on our ancestors, yet you've been outspoken against Tarva's proposals for a voluntary instinct suppression program, and for returning Venlil Prime's name to Skalga through a referendum. Why are you against these options for returning our planet to its natural state?"

"First off, the Governor and I agree on reversing the gene edits. It'll be a priority in either agenda, so let's set that part aside," Veln began. "Now, I find that Tarva rushes into drastic changes with haste. Slanek was the first subject of a program like what she proposes, and he became a violent assassin! We don't understand the consequences of the psychological changes we're making to ourselves, so we should take the time to do so—especially before we raise the government's spending even further.

The programs formed since first contact have tanked our economy, and have been a massive drain on our system and resources. I love the idea of saving the cattle rescues, but the fiscal mismanagement —we don't have infinite money. It comes from somewhere, just like

the instinct program would. Now, I know I'm over my time, so let me be quick on why I don't want 'Skalga.'

I don't like the name 'World of Death.' We can do better."

As laughs rippled through the crowd, I donned the look of a mother who wasn't amused by a child's shenanigans. "I sure hope you don't make all your decisions based on whether you personally like, or dislike, something, Veln. The choice of whether the citizens *like* the name Skalga should be left up to the people themselves, not just forbidden by your decree. As our moderator pointed out, the instincts program is also voluntary. I dream of a future where we're strong, not weak like the Federation claims, but my entire platform is about choice.

Slanek was an incident caused by military training and prolonged exposure to the horrors of war; I want my people to not live in artificial fear. It won't cost the average citizen a credit, because it's taken from bloated exterminator budgets and the power bills of electroshock machines. *That* is wasteful spending which could go to improving and saving lives. Before you cut me off, Veln, since you can't conform to the time constraints, allow me to tack on a little extra too.

The loyal members of the exterminators' guild want accountability for their actions. They want a better understanding of predator attacks, and real predator disease, to limit violence on the streets. They want people who abuse their title ousted, so that they can maintain a true force that protects people. If there's science that can keep them well-informed on animal threats, and ways for them to be safer and not damage property on missions—"

"You're well over your allotted time, Tarva," Jonek interjected.

"Exterminators want those improvements, because they want to make their planet proud," I spewed hastily.

Veln pinned his ears back with disbelief. "The guild devoted to fighting predators doesn't support you, Tarva. Let's not waste time pretending they do. You've shoved humans down their throats, while allowing them to be mocked, and by your own admission, you slashed their budgets. The money they need to defend us and themselves. Those are heroes, and I'm not ashamed to say it. But you wouldn't say those words, because behind your pandering, you question everything they do.

Humans matter more to you than exterminators ever have. You basically said so in your own words. The guild's budget is not wasteful spending, because their job *is* about improving and saving lives. I won't let them apologize for burning creatures that'd threaten and eat our children! Furthermore, I'll give them every credit they ask for, and I'll talk about raising their salaries for the thankless work they do.

Save your cheers; I'm not done! It's funny how you condemn predator disease treatments, and leave us impotent to defend against 'predator attacks.' We learned that predator disease was more prevalent than ever, with those twisted Venlil who live among us, and conceal conniving, predatory minds. We knew they were dangerous, but we didn't know they struck so often. How can you see that evidence, and close the facilities? Do you—"

Jonek cleared his throat. "Veln, you're also past your time."

"Don't worry. The question's to Tarva," my opponent countered. "Do you really think that talking about your feelings can make these monsters herd safe?"

"If the treatments made Venlil safe before, why were there so many attacks?" I shot back. "The methods we have now are clearly, by the evidence, unreliable for detecting threats. Look at the distress for family members, who've had a harmless loved one hauled away and tortured for being different—when the real murderers roamed free. Why would we ever want that to continue?"

"Because our search isn't thorough enough. I don't buy into your argument of humans being predators, so they can identify predator behavior. In the next breath, you tell us they're friendly and innocent, not at all like predators are! The reality is, and I don't say this out of dislike for Terrans, but asking predators to identify dangerous predatory behavior is like asking us to qualify what's extreme prey behavior. Their boundaries are much looser than ours."

"Our boundaries of acceptable behavior are engineered by the Federation. That's the difference. Humans are civilized people who haven't been told how to think. They have a better idea than we do of what's actually predator behavior, and what was just an instrument of Kolshian-Farsul control. Every part of our society was engineered so that the conspirators could keep us subservient and

mock us. Veln, I don't want to listen to a single word those cripplers said, especially when innocent lives are involved. This planet deserves a leader who doesn't buy into those centuries-old lies."

Judging by the crowd's enthusiastic cheers, I'd come out ahead in that exchange; resenting the Federation's lies was a convincing reason to overhaul every tenet of the system. It was clear after what we learned the Farsul did to our ancestors that nothing they forced on us had good intentions. Predator disease was their creation to stop us from resisting, and I was certain enough of the populace could see that. My opponent likely agreed with my logic deep down, though he had to be contrarian to demonstrate his opposition to radical change. Veln seemed to be weighing whether to concede that argument, and move on to a different topic. However, it was a moot point, as Jonek jumped in.

"That was certainly a spirited exchange, but that is all the time we have available for human and Federation-focused topics," the moderator said. "We'll take a short break, and move on to the other issues on your ticket: including infrastructure, schools, and tax policies. Stay tuned!"

I relaxed as the cameras switched off, and studied my opponent out of my periphery. In this crucial debate, it was a good sign that Veln wasn't walking all over me; I was pleased with how I'd stood up for my actions and beliefs. My gaze turned outward, past the various Venlil spectators who chatted among themselves. The human ambassador lifted his mask for a brief second, when my eyes reached him; his pearly teeth flashed all the way from the back of the auditorium. Noah quietly clapped, ducking his head as a commendation. His approval filled me with confidence; if the silver-tongued predator believed in what I was saying, my words must be enough to resonate with others.

The question now was whether this final appeal to the Venlil citizenry would carry me to reelection.

Chapter 152

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 9, 2137

The subspace trails allowed my fleet to pursue the Kolshians, who, without reason, had abandoned their already secured position at Mileau; after a few days of pursuit, it became clear that our enemies weren't bound for the *Liberty's Bastion* colony. Secretary-General Zhao had evacuated the human colonists there out of an overabundance of caution, but curing predator expansionists was no longer the priority of the government caste. This route was steering us through the territory of the youngest Chief Hunter, Ilthiss, who was keen on proving himself to Betterment. It wasn't only Federation onslaughts we had to watch for. I kept my bridge on alert, in case we were plunged into real space while clearing the parsecs between us and our foes.

There were no human strongholds in Ilthiss' territory, to my knowledge; the lone Sapient Coalition member in his reach were the Nevoks, and with their manufacturing abilities, they kept enough of a fleet for themselves to thwart simple raids. Most powers within this sector were either on the side of the Duerten Shield, since Kalqua and its neighbors were centered there, or Federation loyalists such as the Malti and the Drezjin. Keeping track of every herbivorous race was a real headache, though my talks with Felra had been useful in picking up Federation customs. If I wanted peace between us and the leaf-lickers, it was my role as a leader to learn about them all.

I'm done with this Arxur-and-syasara game, I messaged Felra on SwiftPair, as we'd returned to doing throughout this tracking expedition. *You're trying to force me to be curious, by offering zero details about what you've been up to—and talking about anything else! So fine, you win, can you not see that? What was it like on Liberty's Bastion?*

The rodent began typing back at once. *You have to show that you care, Siffy! Admit it, I'm way more helpful and special than Vysith. Now that we don't see each other daily, you have to work for my friendship.*

Why should I bother with such a colossal effort, you irritating, no-good Dossur?

You love me, but you're too moody to admit it. You like that I think you're harmless and sweet. Want to video call?

I will not let you make a fool of me while I'm on the bridge. If my men think I'm soft, they will not respect me. It does not matter if you believe you are helping; it is detrimental to my authority when you demand that I pet you, like one of those human idiots. Answer my question about the colony, or I will rescind my interest.

You're such a goofy gray, Siffy; once you admit you're interested, you can't take it back. I'll answer because I'm feeling generous. It's the humans' furthest colony away from Sol, and the habitation modules are cramped and practical—most of the settlers came because the UN offered free housing to the first people to sign up. The Mazics have some weird hero worship thing going on, and they have a joint military base with the UN for patrols and such. It's quiet and unglamorous. The Terrans I lived with called it "life on the new frontier." I don't know what that means.

I'm sure the Terrans would tell you if you asked, no? I've never met a human that was not elated to divulge their thoughts at an unnecessary length.

Humans are as friendly as can be! I can't believe I thought they were scary, back at work. I kinda miss inspecting starships, and I wonder if the Terrans could find me a job. If they let us go back to the colony, I might stay there. After visiting my family on Mileau, of course. I really appreciate how you came back to save my people. That proves that you care, no matter what you say.

I huffed in irritation. *Why would you not wish to return to your planet, now that it is free of Kolshians? Your life was disrupted, and this must have brought some degree of emotional difficulty.*

Well, I don't want to go home. It's more exciting out here! How could I go from bossing predators around to filing safety complaints with bureaucrats? Seriously, I'm way too curious about predator stuff to bury that side of me ever again. Mileau couldn't handle me.

I snorted. *That I believe.* I *cannot handle you. Now, our present course is leading us directly into Duerten Homogeneity space—toward their homeworld, no less. We know how hostile they are to the Rebellion,*

after they walked out of the Summit on my account, yes? Decisions must be made about how to proceed. I have to go.

Bye, Siffy! Don't die.

My annoyance was heightened by that flippant dismissal, so I decided not to bother with a farewell response. Placing the holopad into a drawer, where it would be out of my sight, I snapped my attention to the bridge activities. Kaisal had just returned to his post, taking over the sensors console from Oleksiy, who'd been filling in while the runt slept. All personnel were ordered to combat stations, when we saw that our trajectory was bound straight for Kalqua. In my eyes, we had to follow the Kolshians to their destination, even if it took us through Duerten space. However, taking roundabout pathing might be ideal: we could pick up the trail on the other side of their system.

Kalqua was under siege for their part in Nikonus' assassination, last I heard, so the Duerten might not have resources to divert to us. Lisa told me they were not responding to any communications.

The signs pointed toward the Kolshian forces from Mileau heading to Kalqua, except for the fact that the initial strike force had been enough to thrash the Duerten and silence their people. Still, it was within the realm of possibility that the Federation sent every ship available to annihilate the Homogeneity with absolute certainty. Secretary-General Zhao postulated, back on Earth, that the shadow government was plotting to strike human territory. Perhaps the avians' scheme on Aafa, making the Kolshian Commonwealth out to be fools, had shifted the priorities around. Where the conspiracy wanted to cure humanity, the goal seemed to be eradicating the Duerten. The rebel fleet emerged into real space on my command, and the Technocracy ships followed suit a second later.

I elected to touch base with the Yotul on this decision, through our shared comms link. "We're approaching Duerten space. I'll have my sensors station catch their bearings, and see if we're close enough to detect where these subspace trails wind up."

"We ran continuous scans to trace the end destination while in warp." The marsupials' response was a casual indicator that their sensor capability while in FTL transit had surpassed our own. "It does appear to be Kalqua. UN and Technocracy generals are currently conferencing to determine our governments' position."

“I see. What is your personal opinion? As the ones spearheading this hunt, I would take your judgments into consideration on why we should or should not intervene.”

“Well, I doubt the Duerten would lower themselves to ask a *primitive* to bail them out. Ralchi knows they’d never ask an Arxur to step in either, if they’re too prideful to turn to the humans. There’s no love lost between the Sapient Coalition and the Duerten. I did want to finish the muzzle-kicking we gave the Kolshians at Mileau, but fuck if I want to sacrifice any Yotul lives for a lot of ingrates. Point is, I think we should see how many enemy ships we’ll be dealing with, and run some risk-reward calculations.”

“I will take that under advisement. After we have gone all this way to pursue the departees, I see no harm in gathering visual information from the system’s outskirts. In the event we enter combat, it would be helpful to know how many foes we’re up against.”

“Then I’ll seek clearance from the Technocracy to scout the battleground. My two seeds; I doubt the Duerten will pay us any attention. They won’t be able to. They got walloped by a couple drones when they tried to ‘help’ at the start of the Battle of Mileau. Humanity’s not covering their asses this time; they’re on their own.”

“Most herbivores are not worthy fighters. I do not imagine the Duerten Homogeneity would fare well against any shadow fleet attack, let alone an all-out assault. Keep us posted on your movements, or any new information. We will do the same.”

“Understood.”

It felt peculiar to defer strategic decision-making to the Technocracy, but the Yotul had more than proven their competency. If human generals judged their officers as equals, then I trusted the United Nations and their close friends to reach an appropriate decision for our interests. Out of gratitude for Secretary-General Zhao’s attempts to protect Felra on my behalf, my offer to assist stood in spite of my disdain for the Duerten. The lack of activity meant I should occupy my mind on other matters, while awaiting a verdict. I rummaged through a few briefings on the Dominion’s movements, knowing that we needed to return to wreaking havoc on their formations and locations after this clash.

This pathing plants the idea to go after Chief Hunter Ilthiss; the fires of

youth mean we want to weaken him, before he tries anything bold and reckless. Then again, while I'm sure the humans would call this "Machiavellian," perhaps it's better to leave him active. This is a Federation and Shield sector, so we could afford for the Arxur to keep raiding them.

Freeing cattle wasn't going to make the most die-hard believers or fearful subsidiaries jump ship. I could rifle through intelligence on the Malti and the Drezjin when I had more time; from the little I knew, the monotreme Malti were willing to go along with anything the Kolshians said in exchange for favorable treatment. The Drezjin, meanwhile, were cave-dwelling mammals, and coincidentally, the only non-avian sapients that could fly. From what little I knew, they had an entire faith that viewed the Federation's founders as divine avatars, due to a few ancient cave paintings they'd found. If the Dominion took those two out, they would be saving the Sapient Coalition the trouble.

Olek tapped me on the shoulder. "Sir, General Jones is on the line for you. Should I put her through?"

"That's a name I have not heard in a while. The Secretary-General is allowing her to meddle again, or is this some new attempt on her own to procure something from me?" I sighed.

"I don't know. She's virtually attending that conference of UN and Technocracy generals. I'd wager she's keeping you in the loop on whatever hush-hush intel is factoring into their decision."

"We should hear what she has to say, whether it's with the SecGen's blessing or not. Jones is the only one bringing us up to speed live. Knowledge is everything," an eavesdropping Lisa chimed in.

"Yes, yes…but I'm not doing anything extra that Jones asks of us. I have no patience for games. Put her through."

Peacekeeper Bondarenko tapped a button, and gestured to his workstation. I sidled up to the display with my most serious expression, indicating to the short-haired American general that I wouldn't tolerate double-edged aid. My prior cooperation with her had resulted in Zhao believing I was an enemy, and later, me being burned as a source to strong-arm me into launching a rebellion. I couldn't afford to push aside any contacts from Earth; the United Nations hadn't come to blows with the Dominion directly in months, but total war was on the horizon if they trounced the

Federation. Still, I was leery of getting dragged into Jones' scheming.

"Chief Hunter," Jones greeted me. "Taking an interest in UN colonies all of a sudden? I'll have you know humans aren't interested in jawing off about natural security issues, after Earth."

I narrowed my eyes. "Flaunting how you listen in on my private conversations won't win my favor or my trust. I was asking after a friend."

"Please. I'm actively tapping Felra's comms, not yours, and it's for your protection. She's a major liability; if anything happened to her, I can't predict *what* you'd do. The last thing I'd want is the Dominion or the Federation snatching her for the sake of extorting you."

"…what?"

"Don't make me spell it out. Just know my people are watching out for you, covertly. I've always thought we can help each other, Isif. With how valuable of an asset you are, you can't blame me for not entrusting you to anyone else's oversight."

"I gave you much, at great risk, and got very little in return. I implore you to cease these games, and turn over whatever information is at the root of this call."

"I was getting there. I've tinkered with our computerized recreations, and we fed known telemetry data, subspace activity, and acoustic readings into our programs. Take a look at our… highlight reel. I'll narrate."

The Terran general transferred a video file, which replicated an overview of Kalqua's sphere. The overlay presented estimated ship counts, and I nearly choked as I saw the figure of enemy vessels swarming the Duerten homeworld. The count had crossed the six figure tally in the first wave, dwarfing the number that had taken Mileau. I wasn't sure how the gray avians had withstood an attack of that scale at all, even with forty-four Shield allies' mediocre militaries coming to their aid. It also was concerning that the shadow fleet had this many craft to throw at an enemy that pissed them off, despite knowing an attack on Aafa could be coming. How many more ships were being held by the Kolshian homeworld?

If these colonizers have six figures worth of bonafide ships on reserve,

I'm not sure how even humanity executes Phase 3 of their plans. Aafa should be able to rebuff anything that's thrown at them.

General Jones raised a placating hand. "Before you go looking all concerned, these aren't shadow fleet ships. Most aren't even Kolshian ships, and the ones that are—they're from the public military. Average 'herbivores' by their definition. The Federation has over 200 allies, so ask everyone to kick in a few hundred craft and this is what it gets you."

"This is…some attempt to soften up Kalqua with expendable resources," I suggested.

"I think so. Kalqua got word of the attack in advance, thanks to an anonymous tip—and you know who let that intel fall into their laps. They would've been wiped out without the forewarning. The Duerten Shield's allies sent some assistance, though not every party was willing to get involved. They started off with roundabouts sixty thousand ships and planetary defenses on their side."

"That count is disproportionate, but not guaranteeing a Federation success. How much did the first wave whittle the Duerten fleet down?"

"Well, see for yourself."

I returned my attention to the recreation, noting how the first Federation ships flew headlong into a rock-solid formation of Duerten craft. Kalqua's moon harbored a planetary defense station, with enormous power built into its cratered surface to fuel energy weapons. Punchy lasers carved through enemy vessels, and pushed them away from orbital range. The defenders had other fortifications to their advantage; Jones' tip-off had allowed them to imitate a "predatory" tactic, sending a few ships to hide within a gas giant's gravity to later encircle the Kolshian-led attackers.

The Federation's lone advantage was the gigantic scale of their onslaught, which made the extermination fleet that leveled cities on Earth look like a small militia. The Duerten weren't as green at the spacefaring game as the primates who, at that point, had discovered alien life and FTL a single season ago; they also had more allies to call to their aid, while a few hundred Venlil and late-arriving Zurulians were all the Terrans had cobbled together. However, despite a strong start and those factors offering a favorable prognosis, the avians lacked humanity's coordination and tactical

knowhow. They executed a few basic plays, before their ingenuity and organization faltered.

The Federation fleet focused fire on the defense stations on Kalqua's moon, as well as a handful of satellite modules with defensive weapons strapped to them. Duerten Shield vessels were out of their depth; even while using the public fleet as cannon fodder, the Kolshians placed legitimate commanders in charge of this assault. The raiders had sacrificed a few thousand ships to take the defenses out of commission. The weakest flank encircling the avians' homeworld became the new epicenter of the attack, now that the hostiles were free of any devastating lasers that would hound them.

I could see, to my amazement, that the Federation vessels had missiles primed. How had the Kolshians gotten their allies onboard with turning a prey species' cradle to ash? The native Homogeneity fleet were panicking, desperate to keep the raiders away from their precious homeworld. Taking a glance at General Jones' face, as the simulation sped through these events, the rare sympathy in her eyes told me she understood that feeling all too well. I recalled how Terran-crewed vessels had flung themselves at Kalsim's murderous minions, powerless to stop the bombs from hitting Earth.

None of these races participated in that extermination fleet, but they can't claim to be any different.

While the Duerten were far from my favorite species, and I had presided over bombing events like this one myself, it was saddening once I linked Kalqua and Earth in my mind. Federation ships plowed through the Shield's weak links, pirouetting through a sea of plasma and missiles; several invaders went up in smoke, but some slipped through toward the vulnerable planet. The missiles set sail in the simulation, while a wince took over Jones' features. Detonations rippled across the continents, targeted without mercy at population centers. The estimated civilian death tally climbed as the recreation progressed to the present time: dozens of bombs had made it to the surface.

"That takes us to where we are now, with thirty thousand shadow fleet ships arriving from Mileau to clean up," General Jones concluded. "The Duerten are down to their last legs, holding at about ten thousand, though they felled most of the Federation invaders to the same tally. I wouldn't take their odds at one-to-one

against the Kolshian's secret sauce. It's three-to-one, and that's not counting the equal contingent of leftovers from the first wave."

I lashed my tail with flustered emotions. "We all have our own problems, General. The Duerten spit in our faces and called us monsters; us, at least, with more cause than you. Is the sentiment in your generals' meeting that you're expecting us to risk our lives for them?"

"Nobody's going to make any decision for you, Isif. It's up to you and the Yotul to commit, or not commit, resources. If we don't act, the Duerten race will be wiped out to functional extinction; that's a fact. I thought you should see everything with your own eyes."

"It's unlike you to not openly push a course of action on me. I will consider both the reality of the situation, and what the Yotul plan to do. Tell me, is the Technocracy likely to step in?"

Jones offered a cryptic grin. "I could give you the likeliest answer, but where's the fun in that? With the urgency of the situation, discussions won't stretch on much longer. The Yotul will tell you themselves, when they're ready."

Before I could protest the Terran general's non-answer, she disconnected from the call. A few displeased hisses and growls rumbled in my throat, earning looks from the nearest bridge crew. My conscience was torn on what to do; what was best for the Rebellion was to leave the predator-hating avians to suffer the consequences of their actions. Yet despite how they'd smacked down every hand of friendship humanity offered, I didn't want to see them dead. From what Olek and Lisa told me last time I broached the subject of the Duerten, neither did mankind. The Yotul's advancements were magnificent, but it was a tall order for three thousand of them to tackle this alone.

The decision to assist could be attributed to softness by my people, if it was made of my own accord. My gaze turned to Kaisal, the Arxur runt who was acting as my second-in-command. Consulting him would demonstrate consideration for the sentiments of my subordinates, and lift the sole responsibility from my shoulders. This was the field test to gauge his empathy; perhaps there was some, lurking beneath his hatred and resentment toward prey. With a heavy heart, I walked over to leave the Duerten's fate in his jaws.

Chapter 153

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 9, 2137

The Yotul's decision was relayed over our comms, within minutes of my conversation with General Jones. The marsupial commander didn't sound entirely thrilled at the prospect of saving the Duerten, but humanity had been a major force in pushing for the preservation of the civilian masses on Kalqua. Had the avians been willing to ask, I suspected the predators would've been there for the first wave. The United Nations, stretched across hundreds of light-years and multiple engagements, could only warp in a few thousand drones to pad our ranks; they'd been amassing that contingent nearby in case the Homogeneity reached out. My rebel fleet brought the most numbers to the table, of our trifecta, but that was if Kaisal elected to send us to battle. The Arxur runt was deep in thought at his station.

He's never been thrilled about anything that benefits prey; he despises every species in the Federation. The fact that he tolerated Felra, even at the behest of an Arxur superior, was a hefty concession. What is he considering?

I lashed my tail with impatience. "We need a decision, Kaisal. The United Nations and the Yotul Technocracy are moving out; time is of the essence."

"Chief Hunter, it is my conclusion that we should take action against these Kolshian warships. Before the crew voices remonstrations, I think we cannot afford to be seen as weak," Kaisal answered, in a voice that sounded more certain than his posture looked. "We pursued the shadow fleet from Mileau, and letting leaf-lickers fight our battles gives us a shameful reputation. They've tried to attack us before at Fahl, so choosing this engagement now is optimal: while we have numbers and allies."

"You do not have a quarrel with aiding the Duerten, in spite of their insults and combat incompetency?"

"The reasons that I was given, when asking why humans aid those who despise them, were pragmatic. Keeping the Duerten as an

active power results in greater numbers to fight the Kolshians, and should improve Terran odds of taking Aafa. It is also beneficial if the Commonwealth must spend more resources attacking Kalqua, rather than us or our limited number of allies. If Earth is under threat, that means they can't afford to spare ships upon our requests."

"Very well. I agree with your line of reasoning, and concede that these aggravating prey have some strategic merit. It is in the interest of the rebellion to thwart the Kolshians' aims, even at the expense of our pride and dignity. Olek, Lisa, communicate with the Yotul and the United Nations respectively. Tell them that we will join their efforts to assist the Duerten Shield's defense."

Olek ducked his head. "Right away, sir. Is there anything else you'd like us to communicate?"

"Not yet. I'll spend our short travel time crafting the appropriate use of our resources. We must minimize our losses, for the sake of this movement's continuance, do you not agree?"

"We agree. If the United Nations has any insight on what role they think is suitable for us, I'll pass that along," Lisa said. "I'll also keep an eye out, in case the Duerten hail us."

Kaisal hissed in annoyance. "I doubt they would communicate with any predator, let alone us. I will keep an eye out for the likeliest scenario—those *ingrates* taking aggressive action against us, when we're here to help."

"If the Duerten attack us, that will bring a swift halt to any attempts to aid them—whether that is practical or not." The muscles in my jaw tightened, and my eyes narrowed. A single shot fired from the Shield on the rebel fleet would result in us vacating the system and leaving Kalqua to its fate. "Our fleet will not bow to prey hatred like the Terrans do, yes? Arxur must keep some honor, if not pride."

Calls of assent echoed throughout the bridge, and I turned my maw toward my readout to dismiss the conversation. The two UN soldiers informed our allies that the rebel fleet would join the operation to rescue the Duerten; I circled back to the simulation Jones had given me, and compared it to the current, murky sensor data. The Arxur were viewed as a terrifying menace, to the average herbivore. I recalled how Kalsim's ships had fallen into flighty chaos when we showed up and nipped at their heels. It might serve us to

attempt to replicate that response by targeting the ten thousand remaining ships of ordinary Feds from the first wave.

Even with Kolshian oversight, Arxur warships arriving to slaughter them will bear psychological ramifications. All we need is for a few commanders to panic, and the entire formation could collapse.

By comparing Jones' recreation to the current ship data, I pinpointed two locales where the first wave's remnants were centered. Just as the Kolshians had targeted the Duerten's weakest link, we should return the favor to achieve the maximum impact. The Yotul's particle beam innovation meant they were the best bet to occupy the shadow fleet drones, and the Terrans could take out enemy shielding at each key flank. The engine's hum resonated beneath my feet; as we coasted into Kalqua's system, I was drafting a rough briefing of my plan. Ensuring that it was a satisfactory visual aid, I had my subordinates transmit it to both the Yotul and human vessels.

I switched open the comms channel, once the mission summary was received. "Yotul commander, as you are quite competent in tactics, I imagine you've reached similar conclusions to us. We'll take advantage of those syasara-brained instincts the Federation forced on their people, and handle what's left of the first wave, while you keep the real threat away from the planet."

"Well, looks like humanity is going to cover the Duerten's asses after all. Dumbfucks don't deserve it. Bright side of these orders is we're gonna put our hindlegs below the Kolshians' tails; the Technocracy will be *delighted* to send the shadow fleet back to the shadows. Blow for blow, one of ours has got ten of 'em beat. I'll forward what we learned from our scouting forays, and then it's up to us both to pull our weights."

"I do not anticipate worthy fighters among the Federation's expendables. We'll be hunting lesser pilots. I imagine you are in the same position with those Kolshian drones, yes? Good fortune, and good hunting, to the Yotul fleet."

"Likewise, Chief Hunter. Give 'em a generous helping of Ralchi's fire for us."

My Yotul counterpart switched off the transmission; I'd be thrilled to sink our charged weapons' teeth into hapless Federation vessels. The rebel fleet split into two movement vectors, at my command, in

order to strike both of the manned contingents. Hundreds of species had brought forth offerings to the attack fleet, though the neighboring Malti and Drezjin ships appeared to be dispensing most of the planetbound bombs. My best guess was that the Kolshians concocted some rationale that Kalqua would be a threat to their safety, if left alone, and that the Duerten would come for them first. I was highly doubtful the Homogeneity was capable of hiding that many Venlil assassins in statues, but Federation loyalists seemed incapable of finding logical discrepancies in any rhetoric from Aafa.

Kalqua enlarged on the viewport under our magnification settings, as we cruised within striking distance of the ongoing battle. Evacuation ships launched from the surface, but despite their civilian payloads, the lengthy-yet-slender silhouettes of Malti tube bombers turned toward them with hostile intent. The Federation-crewed vessel blew the escaping Duerten inhabitants to confetti before they could clear the atmosphere; in my opinion, departing shuttles would be best off keeping to suborbital skies. That would prevent the civilians from having antimatter rained on their metropolitan homes, without getting picked off by merciless attackers once visible.

Kaisal focused on his sensor array with determined eyes. “Sir, the Malti and the Drezjin are proving particularly hostile to the native lifeforms. They’re carrying most of the high-yield bombs.”

“So I’ve noticed. We’ll target those bombers first; we do not want the Duerten wiped out, under the present circumstances,” I responded.

Lisa cleared her throat. “Sir, if I might offer a suggestion… remember how we tipped off the Arxur when the Krakotl and their buddies sailed off into the sunset to kill us all?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Perhaps I could get our contacts in UN intelligence to send an ‘anonymous’ tip about the Malti and Drezjin’s bombing holiday to that Chief Hunter Ilthiss. If we serve them up on a platter, his profile suggests he’s single-minded about proving himself. It’s an easy way to weaken two Federation loyalists, and to keep them off the Duerten’s backs in the event we win.”

“It also gives us a fallback option, in the slim chance that our arrival doesn’t scatter their ships to the wind. Granted, that strategy

failed to dissuade the delusional Kalsim, but I presume his wires were a little crisscrossed. Good work, Reynolds."

The human soldier ducked her head, focusing her intelligent eyes on her display. My warship had locked a distant Malti tube bomber in our sights, and we burned hard across space to catch them. The Duerten Shield were getting pummeled by the overwhelming force, lacking the resources to allocate to their own defense. I could watch the Yotul and Terran vessels off on their separate courses, with the primates showing a disconnect from reality much like Kalsim; they were hailing Kalqua, despite knowing they were persona non grata in this system. While I wouldn't bother with listening in on that conversation, it was a fair guess that Coji was telling them that predators were anything but welcome in this territory.

Oh, I'd rather die than be beholden to the whims of beasts, I imagined the bird squawking, after the Terrans passed along a simple message of being here to help. *You humans are just such terrible, bloodthirsty creatures, trying to stop our planet from being bombed.*

Honestly, that sounded about like what a typical Federation-indoctrinated herbivore would offer in response to humanity's kindness. Sighing to myself, I turned my attention to the battle before us. The Malti tube bomber was cresting toward an open swath of space, but its engines were nothing to marvel at; the majority of its storage was devoted to housing warheads, rather than a propulsion system. Its shape was awkward regardless, not lending itself to maneuverability or acceleration. The other vessel classes would be responsible for its defense, much like a prey herd's mothers encircling their pups.

That weakness left the entire contingent tied down to the defense of a specific grouping. The Drezjin had spread out some of their own craft as a rearguard, watchful for any attempts to encircle them. I supposed even deluded prey could wizen up to recurring tactical motifs, without dogma obstructing them from analyzing "predatory" behavior. As the Malti bombers alerted to our presence, they pushed their pitiful engines further; Kalqua beckoned them toward orbital range. It wasn't clear exactly how many antimatter warheads had smacked the surface so far, but the devastating explosions were visible from space. Add in the sensor data indicating fallout sites, and it was all but certain that the tally of felled cities had reached triple digits.

“Arxur fleet, draw as close to the Drezjin ships as you’re able to. These vessels have been engaged for a lengthy duration, so they’ve sustained damage; they’re not at their strongest. We’ll utilize ballistics and point-defense systems, where they’re especially soft,” I ordered.

On a psychological level, squaring off with an Arxur at close range, where the Feds could see our *menacing visages* from their viewport into ours, would strike at their already dwindling morale. The rebellion’s cruisers took charge, zipping in on an erratic course to dodge plasma targeting. With my command ship in the rearguard, Kaisal lined up vulnerable targets for our twin plasma railguns; our blinding beam pierced through a Drezjin’s drive compartment, and the subsequent reaction culminated in a staggering explosion. I trusted the sensors station to pick out a new target for weapons to mop up, so as our railguns recharged, I turned my gaze back to the front lines on the viewport.

Our cruisers had reached their intended destinations, though a few had been on the receiving end of Drezjin plasma. With our guns breathing down their necks, the prey crews began a hasty course reversal; they were desperate to pad the distance between them and the vicious Arxur. However, backward thrust brought us closer to the slow-moving Malti bombers, which they couldn’t afford to sacrifice. Kalqua would take much longer to lay to waste without the party with the most firepower. A satisfied growl rumbled in my throat, as I watched our rapid-fire kinetics slice through critical components. The Federation crews dispensed their entire caches of combat missiles in an attempt to push us away, though without targeting, the accuracy was lacking.

For every four explosives that missed the rebellion craft, one aimed itself in the right direction. Our point defenses picked off some before they could fully orient on us, and with the close proximity, that meant several warheads blew up in the Drezjin’s face. However, I could still see orange fire erupt across a handful of Arxur hulls, alongside the light shows in the void. Tipping the scales in our favor, the volume of lead we were pumping at hostile engines wasn’t deflecting harmlessly; shields were a non-factor at that close of a range. There was only so much force that could be absorbed. Not every bullet stream was enough to incapacitate or implode an enemy, but I was certain it was enough to get the

warning bells ringing.

“Sir, the message has been passed along to Ilthiss,” Lisa piped up. “Do you want to inform the enemy of this development?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Negative. Let’s keep some…meat in the icebox. If we can win this of our own accord, it’s strategically beneficial that the Malti and Drezjin are unaware of the impending assault, yes?”

“Understood.”

The toughened exterior the Drezjin were presenting was beginning to crumble back into familiar prey dynamics; the remaining ships began to swerve any direction to escape, in the space version of a stampede. It was every Fed for themselves, with the Malti a long-forgotten objective amidst their haywire instincts. Whatever the humans had said to the Duerten Shield had been enough to get them to play along with our plan, it seemed. The avians had diverted focus to the shadow fleet, trusting the loathsome Arxur to handle the first wave leftovers. I was confident that we could deliver on that promise soon, with the enemy’s deficits in every category.

There are other species among those that came at the Kolshians’ request, but these two are the leaders and are sticking together. If their central core collapses, not only will this contingent be lacking in antimatter, but the other species’ following them will likely flee as well.

Initiative wasn’t a word that a Federation military seemed to have in their vocabulary. Kaisal had been diligent in finding lone vessels for us to pick off, and now, our entire fleet had a clear angle on our desired targets. The Arxur runt determined that it was time to utilize our missiles; on his command, a barrage booked it toward a trio of Malti bombers. The craft deployed interceptors in the nick of time, but we followed it up with a second barrage. Other rebel warships chipped in, ganging up on targets across the skirmish line. Enemies were being taken out like fires on a rainy night; one after another was puffed out of existence by our combined firepower.

The lumbering Malti ships weren’t able to run and save themselves, as the Drezjin had. Their vessels were picked off with cold precision, just as we had dominated them in our past raids. I could feel a tinge of the old powerful feelings, coursing through my veins like motor oil. It felt invigorating to command such a lopsided

display, and to recapture the role of savior I'd had on Earth months ago. The other Federation craft saw their ringleaders succumbing to our might, and decided they'd had enough. Kalqua's extinction was a long-forgotten goal; I watched them beeline toward any open path out of the system. The shadow fleet were on their own against four powers.

"Yotul fleet, come in," I barked into my comms link. "We've cleared the manned vessels from the system. While they were expendable to the Federation, it lightens the pressure off of you and the Shield. I have a few ships chasing down stragglers and finishing off immobilized hostiles as we speak. How are you faring?"

The marsupial commander was on the line in an instant. "I'm afraid we're quite outnumbered, and the Duerten Shield are little more than bodies. That said, the Technocracy can take out a shadow fleet drone in seconds. They can block plasma and standard kinetics real well, but those neverpouched squids are plenty weak to particles moving at 0.98c. We've had to absorb a few punches, and most of our ships didn't have that dispensable outer shell intact after Mileau, but the Terran drones have been acting as a buffer. My feed attributes eight thousand confirmed kills from the three thousand of us—not too shabby, huh?"

"Indeed. How many losses have you sustained?"

"A few hundred Yotul ships down, but the fact we haven't lost more is thanks to the Terrans. They've bled about two thousand drones to preserve our lives. We could use your numbers to keep the near twenty-thousand remaining ships off our tail. The Duerten can't seem to do much more than sit slack-jawed and watch."

"We do not have the capacity to replace our ships that are lost, so we will play only a supporting role. You just need extra guns, yes?"

"Anything's better than nothing, Chief Hunter. We can't be everywhere. You get involved in the picture, and suddenly, assuming you count the Duerten, we have a numerical advantage. As the humans say, we're in business."

"Very well. You'll have long-range plasma support."

"Excellent. Once you arrive into the picture, the Terrans are going to *try* to convince the Duerten to charge guns-blazing. Humans are damn good talkers and all, but by the purification rites, I wish them

sincere luck with that! They'll need it. Contact us if there's anything at all you need to relay; otherwise, let's make some robot calamari."

"We are happy to heed that directive. Good fortune, as always."

I switched off the line, and rerouted my vessels toward various requests for backup sent by the Technocracy. The other group of rebel craft, dispatched to pick off a separate group of first wave leftovers, had also chased their quarry from the system; that left just the drones of the shadow fleet. I spotted several Kolshian automatons encroaching on Kalqua's inner sanctum, and watched warheads tumble out of their bellies. Before my watching eyes, a Terran drone flung itself in the path of one missile, sparing a metropolis from a city-leveling dispersion. Unfortunately, the other explosives were jettisoned out of interception range. Since the Duerten were not a Sapient Coalition power, they lacked the missile defense systems that humans had been posting on their affiliated worlds.

With more murderous munitions striking Kalqua's flesh, adding to a tally of detonations that was approaching the second hundred, I vowed to help the Yotul and the Terrans secure the region. The goal of my rebellion was as much to thwart the Kolshians' aims as the Dominion's, now; both parties presented a threat to the peaceful coexistence I desired.

Chapter 154

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 9, 2137

Our vessel was in dire need of repairs, after the high-octane firefight that took place inside of our walls. The Kolshians had been rebuffed in most of their boarding attempts, with the Terrans' superior reflexes and wits providing a massive advantage. However, the enemy had been able to take the bridge on two of our ships, but the UN captains triggered the self-destruct before they could assume control. The primates were defiant to their last breaths, willing to sacrifice themselves to a fiery end if it meant that the bastards couldn't get their tentacles on our gadgetry. I liked to think that I had a great deal of courage, but I wasn't certain I could've set off the detonation sequence without hesitation, knowing I was still aboard. Human bravery never failed to impress me.

Tyler had embraced me in the tightest hug I'd ever received from him, after the ordeal Samantha and I went through. Despite the fact that the intruders had been cleared from our vessel, my exchange partner had been hovering at my side as much as possible. He didn't make a single jibe about my prior controller-smashing episodes during our gaming sessions; though he'd never get overtly weepy, I was touched to see how terrified he was by the prospect of losing me. I deigned to stick by my brother-in-arms, so we could protect each other going forward. As we docked with a mobile repair gantry that had warped in, I was excited to tour the latest developments in the maintenance department.

This entire construct was a novel idea; it allowed ship touchups to be expedited! The bridge would be back in tiptop shape in no time, and I imagined they'd place a permanent seal in the microscopic hull gap I'd patched while we were out. I'd love to pick a Terran engineer's brain, comparing their knowledge to my own and exchanging opinions on the latest technologies. Likely, the rest of our warship's crew would've found the repair gabbing boring; I almost felt a little bad for Tyler tagging along on my sightseeing expedition. However, I imagined he'd be more miserable worrying about a repeat of the boarding incident than listening to me spew facts like a *geyser*.

“We need to have a talk, Onso,” Tyler grumbled, as we descended down the exit ramp into the station’s walkway. “There’s some rumors about you causing trouble on the ship.”

I perked my ears up, widening my eyes to look innocent. “For the Kolshians?”

“That look right there is exactly the problem. Sam told me you’ve been doin’ the begging shit to get folks to do stuff for ya. She’s right that you need to knock it off.”

“Ooh, a scolding from my commanding officer. Worried I’ll turn it on you? You know, I would, if you could cook anything other than instant ramen. Sovlin told me all about your unimpressive efforts.”

“I know you think it’s fun and games, but listen here. It’s kinda funny, but Onso, you want everyone to treat you equal. *That* particular stunt is gonna have folks treating you like their fucking pet, and I don’t see you in the same light as my dog Zeus. You don’t wanna align yourself with animal behavior, right? Guy who’s sharp as a whip shouldn’t be seen as anything below that.”

“Aw c’mon. Maybe I’m sacrificing a little dignity, but a so-called ‘cuteness overload’ gets humans to do stuff I don’t wanna do.”

“We already see Yotul as cute by default…I just never told you ‘cause I didn’t wanna insult you. I’d be pissed if someone pinched my cheeks and was like, ‘Aw, you cutie pie.’”

I swiveled to face the human, grabbing his cheeks as his blue eyes widened with indignation. “Aw, you cutie pie! Who’s a precious human—”

Tyler reached out with a hand, yanking on my tail. The Terran tugged with enough force that I yelped and leapt backward; several human crew that passed us openly turned their heads to gawk at the scene. My exchange partner dusted his hands off, a satisfied smirk on his face. I growled at him, and he beckoned with an open palm for the, “Come at me” gesture. I considered launching myself at him, hindlegs first, but that might be taking the playfighting a bit too far. With reluctance, my posture shifted to something meeker, and I fell back in at his side.

Tyler might be bigger, but I could spar with him. It’d be funny to plant him on his ass with a dropkick; deep down, I genuinely want to try that on a human.

“You’re actually the worst. You’re damn lucky we’re bros, *and* I think you’re cute,” the blond human chuckled. “So, as I was saying, if you want to take advantage of our affectionate nature, you can just ask us to do whatever it is you want like a person. We’ll probably still do it, man. In my case, I’d be there if you asked me to ’cause I’m your friend. Since you’re *my* friend, don’t you dare play games with me, you hear?”

I stuck my snout up high in the air, closing my eyes. “No promises. Or is that an order, *sir*?”

“Oh, fuck you. I’m serious, dude.”

“Yeah, yeah. I got the message loud and clear.”

“Good, because there’s more important matters at hand. Sovlin’s cooked up a new name for you, and I swear, the ‘primitive’ shit is definitely about getting around the jar to spite me at this point. I’m *so* tempted to tattle on him to his shrink.”

“I’m sure I’ll love this. What’s the name? Train lover? Barbarian? Ralchi forbid, taushana?”

“That last one didn’t translate.”

“It’s, um…a slur toward Rinsians. It means shit-sniffing island savage, thereabouts. Thysunites can’t stand that we’re isolated from their ‘culture.’ Don’t you *ever* use that word toward me.”

“Oh. *That* kind of name. Got it. Lips are zipped. Sovlin is unaware of that word, I reckon. He’s taken to calling you an a-ta-vist. I fucking hate saying that.”

“So Sovlin just changed how he calls me a primitive? That’s not so bad. It’s almost a term of endearment. He can’t admit the Yotul who was born without electricity is brighter than him.”

“I really don’t get that, Onso. I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but I can’t imagine growing up without electricity or running water. I dunno if I’d even make it; Yotul were damn tough. From where you started, to how quick you learned everything about an interstellar society? It shows you got a good head screwed on your shoulders.”

“Thanks, I guess. You’d make it, if it was all you knew. You can’t think ‘the best there is’ is rough.”

“That checks out. Can’t miss what you don’t got.”

After jawing off along the way, I spotted a hangar bay where a group of Terrans were clustered around a computer screen, talking animatedly about something. This could be an unparalleled opportunity to discuss my passion with people who shared it, and wouldn't look down on me for being too "primitive" to be considered an academic equal. My tail wagged with happiness, and I bounded away from Tyler without a moment's notice. The blond human sighed with resignation, before trudging after me.

A Terran engineer's head snapped up, and a toothy grin took over his face. "How's it going? Hey, you're the Yotul that took out a dozen Kolshians with fire foam, aren't you? We watched the footage earlier today—you're a badass. What can we do for you?"

"I'd be happy to talk about anything tech-related, if you have time," I replied.

"Then you should check out the feeds we're looking at now. We just launched the biggest fucking cyberattack the Feds have ever seen. Word is, this is Zhao's sideshow to keep Feddie minions from running to Aafa's aid. Look and see."

Interest showed in Tyler's gaze; we both coveted news about the war from other fronts. I'd done some light reading on the humans' forays into digital attacks during the Satellite Wars, but the Treaty of Shanghai put restrictions on cyberwarfare due to its astounding consequences. Under the present circumstances, I didn't imagine the United Nations was applying the letter of their internal laws to obstinate Federation powers. This could be a unique opportunity to parse why the late 21st century skirmish was so devastating to Earth's largest countries. I joined the crowd of Terrans, following their directional eyes.

The total pandemonium depicted on screen, filmed from hundreds of worlds, was jaw-dropping. Without dropping a single bomb, or even positioning a single ship in orbit, the humans had brought entire societies to a standstill; it looked as though the Federation worlds were on the brink of anarchy. Riots occurred in the streets, despite the supposed certainty that prey weren't capable of such behavior. I knew from the lessons of the Grain Wars on Leirn that when food was scarce or other basic needs were denied, civilization could break down in a matter of days. What digital assault could have harvested these results?

I don't see a direct correlation between a loss of internet service or a computer network, and blood in the streets. Perhaps the news anchor's commentary will explain.

Detail by detail, the affected technology and its ramifications were expounded upon over our airwaves. Malware had been placed into the power grids of every Federation-allied entity, resulting in mass blackouts; unless the citizens were remotely located and sustained their facilities on independent power sources, this had a variety of rippling effects. In regions tormented by bitter winters, this left homes in near-freezing temperatures, needing to run appliances off limited backup energy stashes…for those who had any. Affluent neighborhoods were best prepared to weather the storm, while others had to cultivate fires or head out to shelters for refuge. Hospitals running on minimum power were struggling to fuel their machinery, spawning desperate pleas to military hospital ships to take on patients.

The most dire impact of all was the fact that, without refrigeration, entire food stores spoiled; to confound this problem, the humans had also taken out the water mains with their invisible software. Lacking both of the essential building blocks for life, civilians attempted to complete transactions to purchase the remaining supplies at stores. However, the banking system had also been the target of hacking operations. The Terrans drained every credit from each account, and targeted backup servers as well. Without funding to buy food, and with their livelihoods vanished, protestors marched down to their governments' doorsteps. Many states instituted rations and handouts from what was left of the supply chain, but shelves still ran bare as everyone rushed for morsels of food.

"It's everything," I breathed. "An entire society brought to its knees by the things they took for granted, and depended on electronics to fuel. Bet they wish they had *primitive* systems now."

Few elements of society went untouched; the Terrans were ruthless in going after anything that was tapped into a network. Some military personnel had been tricked into downloading malicious files on their closed system ships, allowing the UN to trigger their self-destruct function from afar. The once-secret FTL comms infrastructure was taken out alongside civilian planetary broadcast systems, which meant the armed forces were left unable to transmit

intel. The populace was, likewise, stripped of their ability to receive news, government instructions, or contact their relatives during this time of unrest. The pure genius of humanity's ploy was undeniable. The Federation's allies couldn't come to Aafa's assistance while there were problems at home, their vulnerable technology was untrustworthy, and communications would be cut off with their command and leadership.

Earth would be delusional to attempt to combat over 200 species at once. Now, whatever shadow fleet resources are amassed in the Kolshians' systems have to fare for themselves. The Commonwealth might have to backpedal their other operations and defend their homeworld.

After seeing cyberwarfare in action, I could grasp why the Satellite Wars ravaged Earth's industrialized nations, punishing them for every advancement they'd made in any field that revolved around technology. Civilians could be caught in the cross-fire, with every facet of their lives unraveling by the invisible hand of a digital threat. It was my new directive to bring this information back to Leirn, assuming humanity wasn't already collaborating with the Yotul on cyberwarfare strategies and defenses. The Technocracy needed, first and foremost, to safeguard our fledgling systems and ships from such attacks. However, it would also be apt if us *primitives* uncovered ways to cripple the very advancements the Federation had lorded over our heads.

"Would ya look at that? We really fucking did it!" Tyler cheered. "I believe we can take Aafa, y'all, just like we took Talsk. This is it. Nikonus Junior, or whoever the fuck their new despot is, will be facing a war tribunal lickety-split."

I swished my tail lazily. "I know what you said about not crossing lines. I'll follow your orders, even if I do see them as soft. But I think the only way to be sure we're rid of the Feddies is to wipe them out once and for all. There's no benefits to keeping a source of such evil alive if we have the chance to cap the well."

"Bah, we're all tempted to wipe 'em off the map or whatnot. But it's a bad precedent for us to do that, and it ain't gonna get the other Feddies to stand down. It won't let us free Slanek or any civilians that're under heel too—any kids who ain't had nothin' to do with this horseshit. No, we wanna end this war and keep it ended. It

doesn't end by following the same old cycle this whole galaxy's been on."

"They have to pay for what they've done, as a collective society! Respectfully, I don't think it matters if there's a precedent for washing our paws of a race that has genocided millions. Do you think it was justified to launch this cyberattack against these Federation subordinates?"

"Well, yeah. Sucks that civilians got wrapped up in it, but it's an option that saves human lives and ships we don't got enough of."

"Doesn't it save human lives to bomb Aafa, and not have to take it by foot?"

"In the short term. You'll pay the blood price of the other Feddies fighting to the death. And you also show the rest of the SC races, including the Yotul, that we're a buncha fuckin' hypocrites. I'd like us to be the ones who show 'em there can be something better. Heroes aren't heroes on a part-time basis."

"I want a peaceful life back on Leirn, helping rebuild my culture. I don't need to be a hero."

"Of course you don't need to, buddy. You'll do it because you don't want the foundation of our peace to be built on sand. You'll do it because you've seen that we're different, and because, even if it's just from a science point of view, you think life means something. *We'll* do it for each other, 'cause we owe it to ourselves and our friends to finish this with dignity."

A Terran engineer whistled with appreciation. "That's a hell of a speech. For what it's worth, I agree with you. Killing a shit ton of people, or any form of mass punishment, has never fixed or helped anything. Always come back to bite you in the ass."

I sighed. "Just out of curiosity…would the 'puppy dog eyes' help at all to win this debate?"

"No! Bad Yotul!" Tyler scolded, a disbelieving glint in his eyes. "You can't beg the UN to let you murk some civvies."

"Maybe not, but if a couple of antimatter bombs *happened* to fall into my control, it wouldn't be their—"

"Clearly you've seen enough chaos and destruction in HD for one day. I'm taking you back to the ship. That *is* an order!"

I struck a pouting posture, while waving a farewell with my tail to the human engineers. This journey hadn't morphed into the technical conversation I'd craved, but it had lent me insight into an entirely new field of study. I was determined to acquire knowledge on digital vulnerabilities, and tinker with how I could engineer safeguards into Leirn's grid, in case we ever ended up on the wrong side of someone with cyberwarfare capabilities. With its present deployment against the Federation's allies, our mission to Aafa suddenly seemed much more feasible. Once our warship was repaired and ready to return to action, it would be up to us to take down the Kolshians through any means necessary.

After everything I'd seen in the past few months, I believed that humanity had what it took to win this war.

Chapter 155

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 10, 2137

Twenty-thousand foes remained active in the system; I wasn't sure how the Terrans planned to gain the Duerten Shield's compliance with their plans. If the local remnants, figuring at about half of the invading force's tally, surged toward the Kolshians, it would make our support much more effective. Their motivation for aggressive action was obvious, with Kalqua rocked by antimatter bombs. Planetary defenses were long since gone, and our rescue operation was the only reason their last remaining forces hadn't been cut down by overwhelming opposition. The Yotul's particle beams gave us a chance, especially since they lacked the recharging requirements of plasma weaponry. Enemy drones had invested their focus on the Technocracy's pesky vessels, giving the Duerten some breathing room.

Most of humanity's drone aid had perished in the initial engagement, protecting life and limb over unbreathing, unfeeling metal. I was pleased that the Duerten hadn't turned their guns on us or the UN, but I suppose even they weren't foolish enough to invite extinction. It was easy to claim that it was better not to exist than to "bow to a predator's whims", when that ultimatum wasn't staring an herbivore in the face. Self-preservation was an instinct that transcended all classes of lifeforms. With the Malti, Drezjin, and other Federation subsidiaries driven out by us, there was hope of keeping some of Kalqua's infrastructure intact. I winced, thinking what percentage of the populace lived in the cities that had already been hit.

Per my documents, the last census data suggests a population of about six and a half billion, including foreigners on work visas or diplomatic stays. It's a smaller number than the amount of people on Earth, largely due to the constant casualties brought on by this endless war.

It was important to take inventory of exactly what was transpiring around my command ship. Through the near-microscopic dots Kaisal had highlighted, I could glimpse human nanodrones on the fly. The Duerten Shield seemed to lack a strategy with their

remaining ships, with every unit operating out of independent desperation. The Yotul were being hounded by any drone that could burn toward them, and could only fend off so many guns-blazing foes, even with exemplary flying. It was obvious where our plasma support was best spent. If humanity's manned ships had taken on automatons in prior engagements, there was no reason Arxur crews couldn't hold our own too. It would reflect poorly on my abilities as a commander if we couldn't drive the Kolshians out in one fell swoop.

"Focus plasma on targets who are in pursuit of the Yotul. Save our missiles for any Kolshians who come for us," I ordered.

Kaisal narrowed his eyes. "Understood, sir. I've forwarded a handful of possible targets that are almost in range of our weapons."

Lisa looked up from her spot beside Bondarenko. "Sir, if I may, I've been informed that the Duerten have been persuaded to charge the enemy."

"All our ducks are in a row. It happens right now, all at once. We'll be throwing everything but the kitchen sink at them!" Oleksiy declared, with a chipper grin.

"Everything but the kitchen sink?" The idiom didn't compute with me, and I figured I could attempt to utilize human levity to build "rapport" with my crew. If I was going to bring Arxur back to our old ways, and I couldn't learn from Vysith, it would behoove me to replicate the Terrans' bedside manner. "That saying does not make sense. Why would we be throwing a faucet tool in a space battle? Is this a remark on using anything as a weapon?"

"Well, not that we wouldn't; you know, there were secret programs to use cats as acoustic listening devices! This saying was popularized during our second world war, or so I hear. Anything usable went to the war efforts, so I guess it took off then."

"I regret ever asking to learn more about your inane rationale. Let me know if the United Nations has anything useful to impart, rather than using confusing excerpts about household appliances."

"Uh, yes sir. It is about to get serious, for sure. You could say we're about to go out of the frying pan, into the fire."

"You think it's funny to use this idiom after I warned you, yes? You're lucky your government would not tolerate me breaking your

ankles like I did Kaisal's."

The Arxur grunt winced, drawing his tail closer. "Do not remind me…sir. Given that humans must char their food, and their culture, like ours, revolves around meat-eating, it computes that *kitchenware* is a priceless contributor to their daily lives. I can see why the Duerten would be relegated to the kitchen sink; as incompetent herbivores without a shred of common sense, I do not expect their charge to be useful or deliver on its promised effects."

"A bunch of inadequate resources together may be enough, is that not correct? The Terrans must have completed a similar assessment in their stratagems. We are to save the herbivores and do our part, lest we look to be bumbling idiots like the Duerten."

"Understood. I'm on it."

Our weapons station was attempting to lock onto a Kolshian drone, utilizing the data that Kaisal had forwarded. Several captains in the rebel fleet were coordinating their fire, cultivating synchronicity to deal massive damage once we drew within range. The Yotul were clever enough to keep just ahead of the enemy pursuers, and to slowly loop toward us on an indirect path; they were routing the Federation fleet toward us, which would make it easier to get a crack at our targets. Power was diverted away from non-essential systems aboard my command vessel, ensuring that our initial volley was sizzling with intensity. The dazzling flashes of thousands of plasma beams, fired off in unison, was an impressive display of control.

The robots could dodge through some of the plasma, calculating the munitions' intended course and abruptly twirling out of the way. However, that meant they had to ease up on their pursuit of the Technocracy vessels; the Yotul were ready to bombard them with particle beams, as quickly as their weaponry would allow. The Duerten had also diverted most of their remaining ships into a formation advance, and were using "everything but the kitchen sink": that is, they were using whatever weapons they had left over from the prolonged engagement. Kaisal had ordered our weapons station to hold their fire, and only now granted the permission to annihilate a target. With the Kolshians being pressed on all sides, our chosen target was paying no mind to any rebel fleet follow-up.

I see the point of bringing the Duerten Shield forward. On their own,

they pack very little claw strength, but with the drones ignoring them in favor of greater threats, they can choose their marks unimpeded.

The slim number of remaining Terran drones had drifted away from the Yotul's side, as we stepped into the fold. Humanity's computer-piloted fleet mobilized beside the Duerten Shield, protecting their remnants in the scarce cases they were fired upon. My best guess was that the UN didn't want the Duerten to start sustaining heavy losses, and crumble with their already frazzled nerves. The brazen charge wouldn't hold if they started dropping like prey. I waited with impatience for our plasma railguns to recharge, wanting to pin down the Kolshians before they could craft an evasion strategy.

The Terran nanodrones I'd spotted on the sensors earlier zipped toward any Kolshian drones who had resumed their pursuit of the Yotul; I could see that a few dozen Technocracy ships had been on the receiving end of missile barrages, from debris scattered in the void. The microscopic human automatons pounced on the enemy's lack of shielding, and I watched one swarm ram itself into a foe's thrusters. While it wasn't as decisive as a reactor strike, it was enough to immobilize the drone. A Duerten Shield vessel moseyed in to mop it up, as even those foolish avians could take down a paralyzed target.

"Kaisal, how many more drones do you expect we need to kill before their algorithms recognize they've lost?" I asked.

Lisa shifted on her feet. "If I may interject, I think it's not so simple. The shadow fleet has the kind of numbers that losses aren't their concern. Should the algorithms assess that the battle is lost, I imagine they'll shift their focus to taking out as many souls on Kalqua as possible before going down. This has always been about teaching the Duerten a lesson."

"Their aim was to engineer the complete eradication of the species that defied them, so I cannot argue against your conclusion. My question to the runt—to Kaisal, stands. What's the number where it's decided that all is lost?"

The scrawny Arxur lashed his tail. "In my estimation, we have already crossed that threshold, sir. Between the Yotul, us, and the Duerten Shield scoring kills, I count 6500 fallen enemies. If there's anything the *calamari* wanted to try, they have to make that push while they still have numbers."

I squinted at the viewport, assessing where a push might come from. Several shadow fleet drones had ramped up the pressure on Technocracy vessels, despite understanding it left them vulnerable to the three species covering the Yotul. Another contingent was feinting toward the Duerten homeworld, knowing full well that the Terrans would ram automatons into their foes if needed, to stop them from drawing close enough. The final break-off group I spotted was waltzing into our crosshairs, right into the waiting missiles that we'd conserved to avoid such a head-on assault. Between all of those ostensible last-ditch efforts, there was a small number of hostiles that were unaccounted for.

With the Duerten closing in on the Kolshians from the planet's direction, the Terrans functioning as a middle man, and us backing up the Yotul on headings from the system's outer bounds, that left a single avenue of possibility. The only path to slip away was to blaze off horizontally, while locking the other engagements into a limited area. It was difficult to detect which direction they would've chosen, with the craft having escaped visual range; debris, course data, and a slew of active weapons were drowning out sensor leads in a sea of information. Rather than allowing the Kolshians to dilute our senses, we needed to filter out the irrelevant matters.

I hurried over to the sensors station to preside over the full array, and moved Kaisal out of the way without explanation. Despite grasping that it would leave us blind to a target lock, I switched off all data correlating to in-flight weapons. My next subset to subtract was anything less than half of a ship length, even though that would entail manual spotting to avoid flying into debris or friendly nanodrones. It still remained difficult to parse a particular group of renegades from their buddies, so I resorted to removing all vessels which had been marked as friendly. It was less than ideal to not know our partners' vectors, on top of not viewing their weapons' trajectories. However, if my theory was correct, we had little time to mitigate the shadow fleet's plan to double the casualties on Kalqua.

I pointed with a claw to faint energy readings. "Peel back. See these readings here? The shadow fleet snuck some ships off that way, to bomb Kalqua. Send our fastest craft after them!"

"I'll send word to the United Nations," Lisa chimed in. "They'll be responsible for filling in the Duerten Shield, who I'm sure have been

so pleasant to work with."

Oleksiy narrowed his eyes. "I'll tell the Yotul, though I don't imagine they have a hope of intercepting ships that are closer to us. We have to stop the squids! Each drone probably only has one antimatter bomb aboard, but if there's a few hundred ships that's __"

"We do learn arithmetic on Wriss, contrary to common beliefs. That would induce more city hits than they've already racked up in the sum of the battle. Over a billion more dead. Unlike Kalsim's fools, the Kolshians have been strategic enough to take out key military strongholds and seats of government across Kalqua already, so now, it'll be pure population."

"The Duerten will have a fraction of their former power. As is, they may lose the deciding stake in their Shield alliance," Lisa postulated. "That might be for the best, except that they're a driving force in *hating* the Federation. Plus, their manufacturing capacity is second-to-none in their little group."

"We cannot afford to lose virtually all of their major urban centers, yes? The fastest ships in the rebel fleet have already received a communique to pursue this vector, but we will trail behind to supervise. Divert all power to propulsion."

Kaisal squinted. "With respect, sir, we cannot hope to catch them in a ship of our size. I do not know that our speediest vessels can catch them."

"I did not specify thrusters. Lisa, your job is to get us in touch with the Duerten Shield, through the UN. Charge our warp drive through the standard, stationary protocol, and coordinate a fraction of a second for us to warp to their intended destination. My hope is that we are in-and-out, before the Kolshians notice the opportunity. Get a small enough number of our other warships to jump at the same time, but not enough that the drones notice we're prepping for warp and become wise to it."

Peacekeeper Reynolds ducked her head. "I'm on it, sir. I'll coordinate with navigations."

"Pardon my audacity for asking questions, domineering Chief Hunter, but if we're catching up through FTL, why are you sending the speediest ships after them at sublight velocities?" the Arxur runt

spoke up.

"It's a mere diversion, Kaisal, so that they think we're going after them in that hopeless fashion." I paced back to the captain's station, allowing him to resume full control over the sensors hub. "What do the prey accuse us of so often? It's a *ruse*."

The gravity disturbances of the FTL disruptors were preventing warp travel now; if the Kolshians realized that they'd have an opportunity to slip into subspace, that would allow them to poke their units directly through to orbital range. It was quintessential that they wouldn't have the slightest clue of our intentions, and that the field was reasserted as soon as it was opened. This might mean we'd be thrown back into realspace the hard way, but despite the unpleasant variables, this was the only hope of catching the Kalqua-bound bomb-toters. It was a necessary gambit for the continuance of the Duerten as a galactic power.

This entire rescue mission was a pointless waste of resources if this doesn't succeed, beyond the senseless loss of life that would mirror an Arxur raid. I hoped to never see a planet come to that again, so this must work.

As we stalled in position, protected at the far reaches of the rebel fleet, I watched the warp drive uncoil suitably to chart a path. If I had time to process what was unfolding, I might've even been nervous, despite my immense battle experience. However, it was over before I realized it had started; my command ship lurched into subspace, before our violent expulsion as the disruptors went back up near instantaneously. In that sliver of time which was imperceptible to any lifeform, we'd punched our ticket ahead of the shadow fleet's path. Our warship could stand in the path of the incoming, bomb-bearing foes.

The havoc the FTL disruptors wreaked on our biology wasn't something that could be trained away. The sudden transition confounded the senses: the skin wrapped around my brain felt too tight, my ears bore the sensation of being turned inside out as deafening bells rang within, my body temperature was climbing like I was under a sun-lamp, and my eyes were projecting psychedelic patterns onto everything I saw. An unspeakable level of vertigo made it difficult to think, let alone direct my equally-dazed soldiers to battle stations. The humans had turned flushed shades of red,

and were on the floor struggling to coordinate movements. A growl rumbled in my throat, as I leaned against my station with the full force of my weight.

“Divert power…back to weapons,” I huffed. “MOVE!”

A weapons technician slumped against the buttons, managing to move a paw that weighed a ton to the needed buttons. He collapsed with exhaustion after completing the sequence, and I swiveled my slowly-normalizing vision back to Kaisal. The Arxur runt was on his knees; judging by the concerned look in his eyes, he couldn’t read the overlay. I tried to consult my own, but the dots all bled together through the blur. My eyelids squeezed shut in merciful darkness for a few seconds, and I sucked in measured breaths. My gaze snapped back open with renewed focus, allowing me to gauge the situation.

The Kolshian drones were mere seconds from arriving, so I hoped that my crew could shake off the FTL disruptors’ effects in the next few moments. To my surprise, there were a small handful of Terran drones and Duerten Shield vessels that had made the jump with us, forsaking their counterparts for the good of Kalqua. At least the friendly automatons couldn’t be shaken by the transitional effects on biologics. The rebels on my bridge got their tails back into motion, and tended to the now-ready plasma railgun. We had to throw everything we had at the shadow fleet.

I straightened with pride, despite how much that segue had taken out of me. “Arxur are the finest warriors in the galaxy. We stop them here. We stop *the Federation* here!”

Confident growls echoed across the bridge, as my followers tapped into their strength reserves. The Duerten Shield still looked a bit listless, so their fire might be a bit behind our initial volley. Kaisal zoomed in on a Kolshian drone, and with startling efficiency, our plasma weapon fired. Two other rebel friendlies targeted the same vessel from different angles, making evasion improbable. The automaton fired off a desperate stream of missiles before it was blasted into oblivion; Terran robots deployed a stream of interceptors to neutralize that parting gift.

I didn’t wait for the light of the reactor explosion to die down, before ordering weapons to unleash the missiles that we’d been preserving to save our own hides. The meandering Duerten Shield caught on enough to dump every missile they had at the oncoming

enemies, since that was an easy task to complete. Terran drones forged ahead of us, cruising along vectors that put them on collision courses. Despite the contentious resistance, the Federation were getting close to orbital range of Kalqua. The fractional contingent of craft we warped here had to put a swift end to the few hundred shadow fleet bogeys.

“I never thought I’d be fighting side-by-side with leaf-licking apes and the Duerten Shield,” I muttered to myself, before bellowing orders at a pitch where my crew could hear. “However fast is the quickest you can get that plasma gun online, I want it done faster! Throw ‘everything but the kitchen sink’ at them; if we have it in stock, use it.”

Zhao will definitely have to afford us some maintenance and restocking after this escapade. Our resources are limited, and now depleted.

Our interceptors were repurposed to be hurled at the drones, hoping that anything that landed would hinder their approach. The Duerten Shield had finally brought their plasma guns alive, and were spitting off beams in defense of Kalqua. The shadow fleet dispensed shield-breaking missiles of their own across our joint line, before returning another round of plasma, tailored toward the Duerten ships. I saw that, with the small number of ships we had in their way, our enemy intended to push through our weakest link. Three craft might fall, but one making it through would lend consolation to them.

There had been a negligible number of Terran drones to protect the Duerten from their folly, and the Arxur rebel fleet was otherwise occupied with targets of our own. After running the mental math in my head, it was clear to me that we couldn’t stop every planetbound vessel alone; we had to handle what was in front of us. Due to the efforts I’d led, my forces were cutting down two hundred-odd ships that would’ve ravaged the planet. It spared Kalqua the majority of the damage, but despite our heroic victory approaching certainty, it wasn’t possible here to save the Homogeneity from a few final losses.

The Duerten Shield failed to hold their defensive line, and the Kolshian drones broke through the final stretch to orbital range above the inhabited world. The Duerten pivoted in desperation, with a few desperate enough to save their loved ones that they

mimicked the actions of the Terran drones—ramming into the bombers. Though most hostiles became easy pickings, due to taking no actions to protect themselves, about five dozen enemies made it through to their destination. Plasma beams and missiles struck true against the genocidal metal hunks, but it was too late. The Shield tossed kinetics at the antimatter payloads, hoping against hope to strike the fast-moving warheads, yet knowing it wouldn't work.

In rote silence, my claws switched onto the comms channel, to hear the Yotul declaring they were cleaning up the last remaining Kolshian hostiles back at the warp point. A dark part of my soul almost admired how the shadow fleet sacrificed thousands in a losing battle to increase their casualty count. Our intervention had saved the Duerten from total extinction, and it was an effort that would garner respect from the United Nations. It remained to be seen how this would affect relations between the Homogeneity and the Sapient Coalition, but it might even open the birds' minds to cordial relations. However, as sixty-plus antimatter bombs delved into Kalqua's atmosphere, I couldn't feel any sense of triumph. Today was another bleak mark on the Federation's bloodstained history in this galaxy.

Chapter 156

Memory transcription subject:*Governor Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: March 16, 2137

The election required a colossal effort across Venlil territory to ensure that each voter's voice was heard. The digitization of the election campaigns meant that votes could be cast electronically, in the privacy of their homes, and well in advance of the opening of physical polls. Several identifiers, including biomarkers, were used to verify their identity; early votes could be changed at any time up to the closing of the ballot collection. However, in the interests of not singling out anyone with connectivity problems or who couldn't access an electronic device, in-person voting facilities were open on the big week. Many citizens preferred being part of the herd, and exercising their civic rights among a crowd.

The results from the large percentage of online voters would be accessible almost instantly, but physical votes from each city, outpost, or colony had to be forwarded by local governments. I hadn't felt this nervous during my first election, yet the uncertainty of who would emerge victorious today gnawed at me. Polls were indecisive, with turnout from certain demographics likely to play a major part in who was victorious. A major setback was that most human citizens had been barred from participating in the election, which could've pushed me over the edge. The soul of Skalga was at stake, in my opinion, and I wasn't sure how much of our progress Veln could reverse if he took office. His isolationism would bring us further away from humanity at the worst possible time.

I've done everything I can with social media outreach and campaign ads. I've visited every major city, and run myself ragged going to rural villages and colonies where my popularity is…subpar. Any voters I could sway in Veln's strongholds would increase my chances.

With the polls due to close in only a few minutes, I found myself watching a compilation of attack ads that Veln had spent significant money circulating on the airwaves and the internet. It wasn't as if I was innocuous on this front; I'd gone after his meteoric rise as the nominated challenger, claiming he gained the most signatures by inflating his accomplishments within a small colony's government.

“Veln isn’t ready to handle the responsibility of all Venlilkind,” my tagline had proclaimed. I did see my opponent as clever, but someone who lacked a moral backbone or a good vision for our future. My rival was clever enough to claim his platform worked on any scale he’d tackled so far, and slammed my policies by clipping out-of-context quotes.

“Tarva has proven that she cannot handle the responsibility for Venlilkind. Her unilateral decisions have given **you** no say in your future,” the ad narrator declared, as images of predator disease patients being led out of facilities by humans played on screen. “She takes her ideas straight from the new predators. This was her claim about humans’ knowledge of predator disease.”

A clip of me from the debate played on-screen. “They have a better idea than we do of what’s actually predator behavior.”

“Do you want a puppet leader that trusts humanity’s judgment over our own? Do you think predators have *better ideas* than us?” The footage showed my rival touring an exterminators’ guild on his colony, and signing documents. “Veln is not a follower. He’s a *leader* who will listen to what the people want. You know who to vote for.”

I leaned away from Noah on the couch, and held the remote out of his reach as he tried to cut the feed. Glim seemed apathetic from his position in a reclining chair; the rescue had been taken off my last campaign stops, despite how useful he would be to court the exterminator vote. In his current state, he would’ve done more harm than good to my message. It would look like the Terrans were coercing him into supporting me. The next ad in the compilation rolled, going after me on my ties to Earth again.

“While Tarva was running around, chasing the human ambassador, Veln was working for his constituents. Listen to her own words about how much of her policies and recent efforts have centered around Earth,” a different narrator read.

My eyes were narrowed with indignance on screen. “We’ve been through many stressful situations together, from nearly getting shot down en route to Aafa, to our efforts to stop the genocide of Earth, to working hand-in-paw with the cattle rescues that my government and his bargained for the release of, and now to our collaboration for the Summit.”

“Not only did Tarva *admit* to negotiating with the Arxur, a true predator scourge that eats our children—and ate her own—she also listed all her accomplishments as things on humanity’s agenda. There is no difference between our planets under her leadership.” Behind the narrator’s words, images played of me running with Meier and Noah, as humans stampeded and smoke rose in the background. “By her own admission on the debate stage, your goods will cost more because of higher value-added taxes to fund *these* adventures. And for all of that, the question remains: what has she done for you? Is your planet better now than it was six years ago?”

The clip ended with the words *Vote Veln. No More Federations.* flashing atop a picture of my rival holding a baby Venlil. I couldn’t deny that he was excellent at the political game, and it made me seethe. Noah didn’t want me to wind myself up, pouncing toward me to grab my wrist. He pried the remote from my grasp, and switched it over to a livestream of a news channel. The human winked, before pointing to a clock on the mantle. I flicked my ear in acknowledgment, hearing activity through my campaign headquarters.

My diplomatic advisor, Cheln, peeked his head. “Right on time. The polls have closed. I prepared speeches for both outcomes, ma’am, and sent them to your holopad.”

“Thank you. Whatever happens, it’s been an honor working with you,” I acknowledged. “How are the exit polls looking?”

“Depends on the jurisdiction. You’re polling poorly in rural areas, colonies, or the places with the strongest exterminator guilds. Dayside City is leaning toward you, which is good.”

Noah bared his teeth. “Think good thoughts, Tarva. You have a heart of gold; they’d be silly not to re-elect you.”

“Maybe. We both know the amount of change I’ve brought has put me in a precarious position. The polls seem to have slid toward him since the debate; I thought I did well, but those sound bites about humans are hurting me.”

“I’m glad you’ve stood up for us, even when it’s not easy. What do you think, Glim?”

The rescue offered a blank stare. “I think we’re going to lose. Not

because people all hate humans, but because people hate how Tarva is *way* too close to you. And they're right. You two literally bite each other's faces."

Cheln pinned his ears back against his head. "Wait, what?"

"Glim's not well. You're dismissed, Cheln," I said hastily.

The diplomatic advisor couldn't depart from the room soon enough, and he rejoined the larger crowd assembled around a massive screen in the lobby. I would be there when the results were expected to be known, but in this election, it could come down to the wire. Noah seemed aggravated at Glim, despite the fact that the sweet human rarely showed anger toward any Venlil. Even his patience had limits, though he forgot about the rescue's snide remarks as his eyes darted to our television set. The Terran beamed and pecked me on the cheek, as the 64% who voted early had tilted 50.8% in my favor, compared to Veln's 49.2%.

However, I knew better than to celebrate this early, with it being this close and the rural villages being the ones that skewed toward in-person ballot casting. It would've been preferable if my margin here was wider, rather than depending on the last third of the votes to be favorable. I cozied up to the astronaut with unspeakable weariness, shooting a warning look at Glim not to mouth off again. After the unfathomable stress of the past few months, I wasn't sure I was ready for this claw-biting, long night waiting for results to come in across our space.

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Dayside City, the capital and home of the most humans on Skalga, was among the first provinces to send results. 65% of the in-person voters called for my re-election, though I wasn't sure how much I should read into that. The ones who were Terran dissidents had long since moved out of the city, so if anything, it was discouraging that nearly a third had sided with Veln. Other major cities turned out even less promising results, with me narrowly holding the physical votes in almost all, except for Tonalu City skewing 53.4% toward my opponent. That still padded my lead, and Noah seemed ready to take a victory lap. I respected his optimism.

I don't know why, but I've had a bad feeling about this election since the day began. Maybe it's just my nerves…internally, I'm not confident I have the support of my people. Even if I do win, it's clear from these

margins that the planet is divided.

That was the last good news we'd had in the evening. Rural villages like Celgel Falls, home to Glim's aunt, poured in their tepid amounts of votes, but several skewed around the 75% mark in Veln's favor. While one small settlement wouldn't have been enough to make a dent in my lead of millions, together, they were eating into the metropolitan vote. These people had always been traditionalists, and were known to be less than cordial with human refugees; lack of interaction with Terrans meant they never had the opportunity to change their minds.

"You can't win them all," Noah had said, trying to massage the tension from my shoulders.

The issue was that I wasn't winning any, and that my campaign efforts in those areas didn't seem to have stopped the bleeding. It was a blowout in every single village, which I could imagine Veln feeling the swing of momentum. The colonies only lowered the gap further, and the numbers made my heart plummet. My opponent had been actively ferrying voters on his home colony, Milna, to the polls, and even been on one of those transports himself to plead his case in his already strongest territory. I thought it had been a foolish play, since he already had their votes as a popular governor, but rehashing his beloved tenure paid dividends. Milna was one of the last colonies to report their totals because they nearly doubled a record in-person turnout; Veln was seen as their candidate.

"Veln is a hometown hero who hasn't forgotten his roots, if you ask voters on Milna," Jonek had announced on the election coverage broadcast. "Off of Venlil Prime's soil, she's seen as the Governor of humans. Perhaps it would've been wise to distance herself more from the UN."

Not good. Colonies never feel attached to affairs of the homeworld, but even ones without Veln the visitor are bringing turnout. They have a stake in the humans' arrival, and the ones who don't are no more inclined to vote than past elections.

My numerical advantage had been millions away from my opponent, and seemed insurmountable to Noah, had shrunk to a sliver as the night progressed. The rural villages whittled down my advantage to half of its original count; the unexpected turnout at Milna was the start of a continuing skid. By the time all colonies

had reported, my lead was at a mere 493 votes. I fielded calls from the UN Secretary-General wishing me luck and thanking me for everything I'd done for humanity, which I think was Zhao's way of saying they thought there was a good chance I might lose. The Earthlings must be scrambling to figure out how to deal with a possible Governor Veln, and they didn't want to spring goodbyes on me if I was unseated.

Jonek perked his ears as the camera, as the news broadcast returned from a break. "Hello! If you're tuning in expecting us to hear who the new Governor of Skalga is, we have one province outstanding—the science settlement of Eliga, which has been under sandstorm conditions and is just making contact now. I'm told we can expect results from them in a few minutes. What an election it's been! Polling in Eliga has been a tossup, and it wasn't visited by Tarva or Veln: this could go either way."

"We should go outside with the others," Noah whispered. "Governor or not, I'll always love you."

I wrapped my prosthetic tail around his wrist. "I love you too. If I had to do everything all over again, the only thing I'd change is sending that distress signal in the first place. We'll get through this."

"Of course we will! Worst that happens is you retire from public service, and we get to run off together like I've imagined for months. That's not so terrible, right?"

"It is what I want, but humanity needs me in charge of Skalga, to preserve our close alliance."

"The Venlil can't go back completely, love. You gave us a chance, you made sure millions of people who never would've thought about dealing with predators did the same, and you *saved* our species to boot. You've done so much; we couldn't ask any more. Don't worry about humans, because you've done more than your part on our behalf."

Emotion swelled in my throat, as I marched toward the doorway to enter the lobby with the rest of the staff. These could be my last moments as the leader of Skalga; regardless of what Noah said, I felt responsible for the efficacy of my campaign strategies. How could I justify keeping our relationship quiet to maintain my office if I lost my position to a populist charmer like Veln? How could I

have any say in decisions affecting millions of Terran refugees on this planet? I cared about what happened to the Earthlings; that was the sole reason I sought re-election at all—for their sake.

Noah glanced over his shoulder toward Glim. “Do you want to come with us, and watch the results with the group? We’d love for you to join us.”

“No,” the rescue mumbled.

“Why not? You were a part of this team as much as anyone else.”

“I helped Tarva because I owed her my life…not b-because I think she’s a fitting Governor. A real Venlil wouldn’t have argued for…f-for an Arxur to speak at the Summit. I hope Veln wins.”

I flinched at that sudden admission from the cattle rescue. How could he oppose my candidacy, after my policies freed millions like him from abhorrent conditions? I had volunteered to help with the reintroduction program because I cared about these mistreated Venlil. A scowl took over my astronaut’s features, and his fist clenched beneath my coiled tail. Noah didn’t speak another word to Glim, instead hurrying out with me to the lobby. I tried to clear that exchange from my mind, but the sinking feeling that plagued me all day had reached its crescendo. I didn’t have a good feeling about how the votes from Eliga would shake out in my gut.

“Ma’am.” Kam flicked his ears in acknowledgement, as we fell in beside him and Cheln. “The moment of truth. I’ve argued on behalf of your policies, even when I didn’t agree with them. You couldn’t have been more right about humans. I’m proud to have served your administration.”

“Thank you, General,” I whispered. “Thank you for your service to our planet. Let’s save the goodbyes or congratulations for after we hear the results, though.”

“Copy that.”

An eerie silence overtook the lobby area, as dozens of staffers saw Jonek scan some new information off screen. The Venlil journalist took a moment to prepare himself, savoring the suspense of the ultimate verdict. The knowing glint in his eyes confirmed that the results of the election were known, before he ever said a word. Eliga flashed orange to signify that it had been tallied on the visual aid map; all we needed was to hear the counts that would usher me

into a second term, or elect a new Governor in my stead. It was all I could do not to bury my eyes in Noah's chest, and press my paws over my ears to avoid hearing. The impending news was almost too much to bear.

Jonek cleared his throat. "Eliga has submitted its votes, and with the last outstanding province in, Dayside News Feed can now declare the new Governor-elect. After winning the city's vote by a percentage of 54.6%, the 103rd Governor of the Venlil homeworld will be…"

The journalist paused for dramatic effect, and my breath hitched in my throat. The election would be delivered with his next words, signaling what the voters had chosen for the future of Skalga. I hoped that, whatever decision they had reached, it would turn out well for both the Venlil people and our sincerest allies.

Chapter 157

Memory transcription subject:*Tarva, Exiting Governor of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: March 17, 2137

Jonek straightened his ears, and pronounced the name of the next governor. "…Veln."

My campaign had ended with the dramatic loss of my title; I'd given my concession speech in a daze, and issued thanks to the United Nations' people for all the work we'd done together. With nothing left to lose over our secret, Ambassador Noah and I stood hand in paw at my desk, as I prepared to hand over the governor's duties to Veln. My most trusted advisors were also present, though Glim was a no-show after his barbed words yesterday. When I'd tried to broach the subject with my human astronaut, he'd deflected, saying he was concerned about how I was handling the loss. I believed that was a true statement, but Noah clearly was furious at Glim's opinionated outburst toward me.

It was customary for some staff from previous administrations to be kept on, if they were viewed as competent in their duties; Cheln had been a holdover from the previous organization to me. Military advisors like Kam would've had a better shot at sticking around, had the Venlil general not been a strong proponent of the human alliance. It remained to be seen how firebrand Veln would be as the man-in-charge, and how thoroughly he would cash in his campaign promises. The governor-elect strolled into his office, having given an acceptance speech I didn't bother to watch on the reception lawn.

I can be gracious in defeat, even if I'm worried about what will happen to our alliance with the humans. Veln can't undo all the progress we've made, after we're in this deep. The people spoke, and they didn't have faith in my agenda…so I didn't deserve to win.

Veln wrapped up his speech to arrive in my office with exact promptness, on the dot for when the highest seat in Skalga was officially his. Away from where the cameras were rolling, he was all business; there was a shrewdness in his eyes, though he made a point not to acknowledge Noah and I's intertwined grips. The new

governor took the long way around the desk, to avoid passing us as a couple, and leaned back in the chair. He flicked his ears in satisfaction, and gestured to the recently cleared off desk as though imagining where his personal possessions would go. He then took inventory of the advisors that showed their faces, before finally speaking.

"You. You should consider yourself relieved of your position," the former colony governor spoke, indicating to Noah with his tail. "I want a *real* diplomat from the United Nations here. Someone who can talk policies, negotiate our disagreements, and represent your government on a technical level. I know humans have people like that."

Ambassador Williams offered a tight smile. "I'll reach out to them. Someone from the embassy staff will be in contact within the day."

"Good. But don't go yet, because there's more to that message—some of what I tell Cheln may apply to you. My diplomatic advisor will do much more legwork than under the previous administration; are you up for that, Cheln? Do you want to stay on?"

Cheln gave me an apologetic ear flick. "Sir, I'd be happy to continue to serve the governor's office."

"Very good. Then I want several orders on my desk *today,* so start taking notes and preparing papers for my signature, press releases, and social media posts. Yes, I do understand the last one isn't your job, but I want a cohesive communication strategy. You're going to work with my online presence manager so we're on the same page."

"Understood, Governor Veln."

"Okay, my first order…businesses and municipalities have the right to require visors for binocular-eyed individuals."

I couldn't hold in my gasp of outrage, at the thought of humans being forced to conceal their eyes on our streets. It was better than Veln attempting to throw the Terran refugees off our worlds and revoke their citizenship, but this insulted a piece of their very existence: implying that they were offensive to look at. Such an infringement on the rights of human residents who were equal under the law, singling them out for eye placement, made my prosthetic tail stiffen with fury. How much damage could this do to our alliance with Earth? How would I feel, out on a date with Noah,

if he was forced to wear a visor?

I remember how the external pressure to hide the predatory aspects of his appearance caused him to devalue his own worth on Aafa. I won't let anyone hurt Noah: not even the rightful governor of Skalga.

"How dare you?" I hissed, flailing my tail with outrage.

Noah squeezed my wrist. "It's alright, Tarva. Calm down; you don't have to stick up for us anymore."

"I want to. You're people, just as much as anyone else, and I won't stand for anyone treating you like monsters."

Veln swished his tail in a patient gesture. "I admire what you tried to do, Tarva. A member of your campaign staff told me about you and your human lover—I could've gone a lot further than vague insinuation on the debate stage—but I didn't. I don't hate humans, but I find *that* highly inappropriate. Tell me, do you think that's the sort of thing that should've been disclosed to the public?"

Fucking Glim. The rescue said he wanted Veln to win; he must've been upset when my rival didn't use the information to ruin me. No good deed goes unpunished.

"I don't see what my personal life has to do with denying millions of people the right to show their face!" I spat, fury causing my pitch to climb.

"I'll explain for Noah to pass along to the United Nations in a moment. But what I'm saying, Tarva, is that the people don't want change. Not all at once. They want stability, and to feel in control of their destiny," Veln announced, as if it were self-evident. "Shit, if I went as all out as my campaign promises, they'd resent me too by next election."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I won't uproot any lives, *but* I read the planet's temperature and I plan to take it down a notch. I'll give them enough of what they want to avoid civic unrest, and enough of what the humans want so that they can live with me. Public perception is what's important, and I plan to be a very popular governor—like I was on Milna."

"You think humans can live with a regression of their civic rights? You still haven't addressed what this order means for *them!"*

“I have plenty of time; I was getting there. Rural villages were asking to have humans banned from setting foot in their towns; frankly, I’m not sure why they’d be suicidal enough to go there, but I digress. Businesses want to be allowed not to serve humans without fear of reprisal. So all in all, this is a lukewarm policy, and I have valid reasons. Noah Williams, do you know how many Venlil have been hospitalized on this planet due to binocular eye-induced fainting, since the Battle of Earth?”

The astronaut shifted with discomfort. “No.”

“12,931. Though those could be outdated statistics, since it’s from this morning. I won’t tell you how many died from their fright, because it’s not fair—but I’ll tell you it’s not zero. So yes, I think that if an elderly business owner feels they can’t look at your eyes without fainting, they should have a right to require visors. Or maybe they don’t want the liability if someone passes out on their premises. It doesn’t hurt you…and when you send me an actual diplomat, I’ll be happy to pencil in exceptions should you need to remove them for safety or to engage in an activity.”

As much as I wanted to argue against the proposition, Veln had a valid point over the public health concern. It lingered in the back of my mind that Noah felt responsible for stampede deaths from his arrival, so I knew he’d personally sacrifice his comfort to ensure the safety of Venlil citizens. When framed in that light, the astronaut likely was nodding along with the new governor’s logic internally. Most businesses, at least in Dayside City, would be unlikely to employ such a policy, since it would cost them millions of potential customers. It also might help to lessen potential hostility toward Terrans in backwaters like Celgel Falls, where Glim’s aunt was housed; despite prohibition of travel technically being illegal, several businesses and villages already tried to ban humans from their territory.

Veln’s intention seems to be to score points with his core constituencies, but at least he’s thinking of humans…and doesn’t seem hostile toward them.

“Venlil don’t make decisions for humans, and vice versa. I suspect Terran refugees would be happy with that bargain: not having our values imposed on them.” The new governor signaled “free planet” in tail language, before launching into his next policy. “Alright,

Cheln. I want some funds allocated toward exterminator upgrades, conveniently to upgrade equipment and add new departments to 'spread the workload.' See what I did?"

I twisted my ears in confusion. "You want them to separate their duties?"

"Totally. They're worked too hard, and that's all I'm going to give you on my motives. Right, next item: predator disease facilities. We're launching the Violent Crime Prevention Program pronto. I'm targeting violent strains of the disease with the majority of our resources—which conveniently, should give you the *majority* of what you wanted. Human experts are welcome to draft some guidelines for warning signs."

"Because they know all about violence? Is that the implication?"

"Ah, it's not my fault what people assume. I have no control over that—and I'm sure Venlil who'd jump to that conclusion would believe that about humans regardless. Right, just a few more things, gotta have a productive day one. Next up…immigrants to Venlil Prime from other worlds will not be allowed to vote until six years have passed from the acceptance of their citizenship, to prevent foreign nationals from influencing our politics."

"Mostly to keep Terran refugees from voting in the next provincial governor elections."

"Humans shouldn't be able to move to our planet and tell us what to do. Remember what I said about imposing values? I want people who vote to have stayed here and showed their commitment to us. If I didn't want *any* Earthlings voting, I wouldn't have let those who've already gotten citizenship cast ballots in the next governor election. The humans will know who gave them a path to voting rights, and the Venlil people will know who stopped a sudden influx of predators from swaying our elections. Win-win."

The more I listened to Veln detail his policies, it seemed that he was attempting to play both sides with compromise items. The governor seemed to agree with various revelations that humans gave us, if I could read between the lines, but he wanted to appease the constituents who weren't thrilled about our entire foundation of knowledge being ripped apart. By my own grudging admission, it was a clever strategy; for the sake of political gain, he was more worried about appearances than reality. I could understand I gave

the perception that I went along with anything suggested by humanity. What I couldn't understand why he'd insisted on spelling out his planned changes with me, a deposed rival, in the room.

Perhaps this is, as humans say, a wink and a nod to show Veln is on my side, for some issues…and that his rhetoric is aimed at winning over the masses? Or is this about gloating that he's a better governor?

I heaved a flustered sigh. "Congratulations on your victory, Veln, but as the unseated governor, now an ordinary citizen, I'm not sure why my presence is needed here. What I think of your policies doesn't matter."

"Oh, but it does, because I have something in mind for you," the Venlil replied, with a casual tail swish. "It's about the Sapient Coalition. Now that we've made our planet's affairs independent from human influence, I have decided it's best to remain in the organization to keep an eye on them…write this down, Cheln. As I was saying, to keep an eye on them so we know what they're planning, and can enjoy the pure military benefits of the alliance."

"I'm glad to hear that you won't try to withdraw from the Sapient Coalition, but if that's all you wanted me to hear, you could've led with that."

"Tarva, that's your project. Before you were governor, you were our ambassador to the Federation. I want you to resume a role you were actually well-suited for: to be our ambassador to the Sapient Coalition. It'll keep you in diplomatic contact with humanity, and honestly, I doubt there's anyone more comfortable or connected in the Earth department. Plus, I'll be too busy with affairs here to handle that myself."

I was silent for several seconds, shocked by the request. "Uh, with respect, you just said that you didn't want us entangled with humanity. In that role, I imagine I'll be expected to follow your orders and wishes. You'll want me to sell them on policies I don't agree with: your policies."

"I know you know how to do that, Tarva. I'm sure it'll be difficult, after being governor, to take a step down, and to answer to the same person you lost to, no less. But I want to show that we're not enemies, like I said earlier, to lower the political temperature…and if we show how magnanimous I am along the way, wonderful. I thought you'd have some reservations, so I did think of a small

incentive as a…signing bonus."

"What's that? Don't you dare lord something involving the humans' welfare over my head."

"Nonsense: my offer was a benign topic. I wouldn't play with lives; I'm not the Federation! My incentive was about that referendum for the planet's name. In the interest of self-determination, it should be up to the people—though I do intend to speak my piece on why I'm not a fan of 'Skalga.' You agree to be my ambassador, and I'll get the process in motion."

I turned an inquisitive gaze on Noah, who'd been silent throughout the process. The human was attempting not to interfere with the newly elected governor, and he wasn't more vocal about what decision I should make. Without saying a word, the sideways glance of his binocular eyes told me that he thought I should follow what I wanted to do; I could rely on his affection and support, as long as I was happy. Beneath that, I could sense that the former ambassador wasn't fond of people like Veln. On a personal level, it was difficult for me to trust anyone who was so calculating with their appearances, but having a chance to ensure our continued friendship with Earth and its allies trumped that. Securing positive relations with the predators had been my life's most meaningful work.

My ears flattened with reluctance. "Fine. I'll do it."

"Glad to hear it! Oh, and before you and Noah run along…if humankind has a particular objection to anything I proposed, I'm willing to negotiate. However, I'd need a concession in return that can score me equal political points," Veln said. "Will that be a suitable arrangement, Mr. Williams?"

Noah dipped his head. "We're accustomed to people like you. I'm sure we can work with that."

"Delightful. I look forward to more productive conversations with your replacement. You both may leave. Kam has classified briefings for the governor's ears only, I'm sure."

I forced a polite farewell in tail language, not appreciating that parting shot; Veln couldn't resist sneaking in a reminder of his victory, perhaps in response to Noah's thinly-veiled distaste toward him. As we departed the governor's office for the final time, I

reminded myself that protecting humanity from persecution was more important than pride. The governor could've been more radical with his newfound power, and it was a small victory that I wouldn't be iced out of galactic politics. I couldn't say that the responsibility of an entire planet would be one I missed. If anything, my narrow defeat allowed Noah and I to spend our future together unrestricted.

What came next for humanity and Venlilkind was out of my paws now, but I hoped I'd done enough to lay the groundwork for a peaceful future between our two species.

Chapter 158

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 17, 2137

Knowing how unbeloved my species was on Kalqua, there was no offer extended to the Duerten Homogeneity to help with rebuilding and search-and-rescue; that had been a courtesy to humanity that I couldn't imagine my kind going along with for prey. The avians didn't attempt to drive us and the humans from the system, but they only sent a formal thank you to the Yotul. I wasn't sure whether the Terrans felt slighted, though I sure did. The Duerten were fortunate that my request for temporary aid in restocking munitions, to tide us over until we could contact the United Nations, wasn't phrased as a demand. My lack of diplomatic aplomb meant it was best that I left the leaf-licking primates to deal with the fallout, especially after how the Shield-allied races behaved seeing me at the Summit.

A cryptic communication from Jones pointed us to a repair outpost within a day's travel, repaying our expenditures without me asking. It was strange to have our fleet congregated so far away from the Central Sector, since the rebellion's early focus had been pestering agents within Wriss' territory. I was aware of the fact that we'd devoted an inordinate amount of attention to the Federation, after the surprising partnership between Giznel and Nikonus was revealed. Protecting Kalqua thwarted the Kolshians' primary target, and now, the crux of the war hinged upon whether the Terrans' single-minded push toward Aafa could succeed. That was Zhao's third phase of the war, and rumor had it that stage two, cutting the conspiracy off from hundreds of allies, had been achieved through the Federation's staggering lack of cybersecurity.

If humanity can get the Kolshian dynasty to surrender, then they'll be able to fight against the Dominion. Giznel knows that he is weaker than the Federation, by his own admission, which is why Betterment avoided their ire.

I narrowed my eyes in the briefing room. "The Dominion has not been trying to win a war, yes? I think they do not know how. They have not been active since Shaza's failure at Sillis, which brought

shame upon the Chief Hunter's repute. It may be possible to dismantle their operations enough that it is decided not to fight humanity at all."

"Do you really believe that Giznel would just *surrender*? I'm pretty sure he wishes to keep power at all costs," Lisa responded.

"I think if he believes there is no choice, and sees a way to bargain for some control, it may be possible. I am committed to a peaceful future for our people, and in this instance, I imagine your little SC buddies will not stand for Betterment's survival. With our rebellion left outside the organization, I am concerned with ensuring our continued existence as an independent entity. So the more we can reduce Dominion control, the more bargaining power we have over the Prophet-Descendant if Aafa falls."

Kaisal heaved a weary sigh. "Survival. I see why you have been focused on co-existing with prey. What we've done, returning cattle, trying to communicate, and saving the Duerten, might temper the calls for our race's genocide."

"Indeed. I do not think humanity would allow us to be attacked, given how they seek to end this forever war. However, I am concerned over how much free reign we will have and how we would move forward toward a better future through the galaxy's mistrust. And I want Wriss under our control, not some other world with no history. Giznel must not take our home with him."

Olek adjusted his glasses. "So you're looking for ways to reduce Betterment's authority. What could leave Giznel more paranoid than stripping him of yet another Chief Hunter who's seen as loyal to the cause? We're in the neighborhood anyways."

"Ilthiss? All our intelligence suggests he will stop at nothing to prove himself to Betterment. Young, hot-headed, a true believer. What on Earth would convince him to jump ship?" Lisa countered.

"Well, we did hand him the Malti and Drezjin homeworlds on a silver platter. If he accepted a tip he knew came from us, then it can't be any more treasonous for him to accept a parlay."

I lashed my tail. "That was a different circumstance; a raiding opportunity proves his fierceness to Giznel. Ilthiss will not respond to talking. He responds to open strength and personal rewards, and the idea of a world without violence would disgust him."

“Then show him that the Dominion is weak, Chief Hunter.” Kaisal’s eyes glowed with new confidence, and his maw parted with eagerness. “Show Ilthiss the footage of the Dominion, and how they negotiate with the Kolshians because they cannot best them. How they do not wish to win the war or hunt well.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Perhaps we can show humanity’s strength to Ilthiss. If humans have the power going forward, rewards from Giznel are empty. He’s proving himself to the wrong team. True strength isn’t staying within your role to avoid being crushed by *calamari*, yes?”

Olek chuckled. “I’m surprised you learned that word.”

“I listen to the babbling of you humans when it serves me. If *the Yotul* are calling the Kolshians a human food delicacy, I would be remiss not to adopt this term. The calamari are responsible for the starvation of my people with the cure, regardless of whether Betterment released the cattle virus, so I have few moral quandaries about anything done to Aafa.”

“I hate those leaf-lickers. I hope the Kolshians are burned alive in their homes, for how miserable they have made my life!” Kaisal growled. “Convince Ilthiss that true strength is joining the fight at Aafa, for his personal glory across and beyond the Dominion.”

“Well, the humans are en route to Aafa as we speak. All they must do is get past the border stations and systems in between. So while I can support bringing Ilthiss into the fold, we should craft a plan for how to establish contact with him at once, if you want him to arrive in time.”

I drummed my claws on the table in deep thought; Ilthiss’ location was a given, with him likely trying to bloody the Drezjin and Malti’s nose. Unlike Kalsim’s fleet, the duo had retreated some of its ships even without the stark warning that Krakotl captain had been given. It was my sincere hope that, among the young Chief Hunter’s attempts to grab easy cattle…especially with the egg-laying Malti offering scrumptious delicacies in the form of their unhatched young…I hoped that he had the foresight to take out their shipyards and bases. Coupled with the human cyberattack, that should ensure those loyalists didn’t ever come kicking around again. Even if Aafa was defeated, the true cultists of the Federation, like the Drezjin and the predator-sacrificing Yulpa, would be unlikely to drop out of

the fight.

“Alright, Kaisal, I imagine your plan is for us to head to Drezjin and Malti space and offer assistance? I do not particularly wish to preside over raids myself, especially with the harm that would do to our image. This rebellion is about proving that the Arxur are capable of being more than brutal, senseless beasts,” I growled.

The runt flared his nostrils. “I merely wish for you to travel close enough to pinpoint Ilthiss’ command ship. It won’t be engaged at the center of the battle, though someone as cruelty-proficient as this Chief Hunter will be trying to get some kills himself. You can extend a hail from there.”

“If I may, why don’t we contact UN intelligence and see if they’ve tapped the Arxur comms enough to connect us via FTL channels? There’s no need to put ourselves in the line of fire,” Lisa said.

“Very well,” I acknowledged. “Zhao is the ideal figure to bargain with, though—”

“Jones is your go-to contact for intelligence. With respect, sir, I’ll attempt to go through her, as long as I have your blessing; I can keep her from pushing anything.”

“Fine, but if that plotting human tries to pull some shenanigans, I want us dialing Zhao and *only* Zhao.”

“Of course. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure this is quick and to the point.”

I watched in silence, along with the rest of my advisors, as the primate dialed General Jones. The American intelligence guru had a knowing gleam in her eyes, something which never sat right with me; it was as if she knew what we wanted to ask before any words were said. Terrans could certainly have prying eyes and ears in unexpected places, using technological infrastructure as a weapon. I didn’t quite believe her claim that her agencies weren’t spying on my people. My guess was that the humans listened in even on Tarva’s governorship activities, despite the close alliance. It was fortunate for Earth that they had such a devoted friend in Skalga’s highest office.

Let’s see if Jones gets any ideas about how to use me to her advantage. If Lisa can’t get the spymaster to help the rebellion out of decency, then I’ll never work with her again. I’m not being pushed into doing things

outside of my agenda by manipulative means.

General Jones raised her hands placatingly. “Isif, no need to look so skeptical. All we wanted was to split the Dominion, and tilt the scales of this war. It was in my national and planetary interests to spur you to action at a few key places, but now, there’s no need for subterfuge. I can see you doubt my intentions, but know I’m happy to advance your rebellion’s aims.”

“Lisa, I believe you said you would handle the chatter. I do not feel like chatting; you know how Arxur tire of socializing.”

Lisa snorted. “Yes, I’ve heard most Arxur do. Uh, ma’am, we were hoping you could patch us through to Chief Hunter Ilthiss. Speaking to him could provide a key opportunity to siphon away Giznel’s allies, or that’s the plan.”

“Yes, I definitely support attempts to weaken them without direct engagements. Let me consult my database…ah, what a coincidence!” the general exclaimed, wagging a finger. “I happened to be looking at Ilthiss’ file when you called. I’ll transmit his coordinates, and with this access code, you should be able to communicate with his ship.”

I stifled a sigh as Jones made a few swipes with her fingers. Olek gave me a nod to signify that he received the data, and Lisa disconnected the call after a formal thanks. I was pleased that we’d been able to attain the information with minimal back-and-forth, and that it wasn’t a conditional offering. My eyes narrowed, before I gestured for the two humans and scrawny Kaisal to exit the picture. We couldn’t afford to have any sapients nearby that Ilthiss would see as a sign of weakness. The mask of cruelty that I’d perfected for my facade around Betterment returned, an unwelcome reminder of my own bloody past. I bared my teeth to signify ferocity, and signaled for Olek to initiate the call to the fiery Chief Hunter.

Ilthiss responded, after a long stretch of our entreaty going unanswered, as a proper holographic avatar; the Chief Hunter had taken the time to send the full image of his toned form onto my projector, rather than the basic 2D visual. I suppressed a huff, realizing that I should’ve done the same. That was how the highest-ranking Dominion officers communicated, so out of the gate, my status seemed inferior to him. The hot-headed Arxur had scars sliced across his muzzle that seemed artificially inflicted, perhaps to

signify his toughness. His gray skin had a bit of a green pallor to it, and his features were locked in a permanent scowl. This commander had the swagger of someone who'd fought a thousand battles.

It's apparent he's trying to compensate for his lack of experience through intimidation. Does Ilthiss know what it is to command enough to hold up to the Kolshians?

"Well, if it is not the traitor to the dominance of our people. The filth that bargains with prey, consorting with our enemies," Ilthiss sneered. "What is it that you want?"

I raised my maw in defiance. "For starters, I would like some gratitude for the easy hunt I gave you. I know many things about the state of the galaxy. I also know how to position Arxur for survival *and* strength. You forget the first item, is that not so?"

"I would not pass up prey and a chance to showcase my hunting ability. My raids are much crueler than yours; the best you could do was gassing Venlil schools and a few movie reels."

"Your raid, I'm sure, is quite impressive. That is why I wish to speak with you about more opportunities to demonstrate your talent, and make a name for yourself as you seize power with the utmost prowess. Once you hear my reasons for joining *our* hunt, and what I can offer you, you will have no doubts about which side is weak and which side is beneficial to your agenda."

"I have no reason to listen to your prattling, and I tire of this conversation. Words mean very little, when I do not have any reason to believe you are anything but past your prime and defectively weak. This groveling to the feats of my raid acknowledges my superior cruelty with no resistance. You must prove that you are a better Chief Hunter than me, if I am to listen to this at all. The softened up worlds you placed in my jaws are the sole reason I took your call; in the interest of more feasts you may know about."

"A contest of strength is one I can handle. I have seen many battles and am certain that I can outmaneuver the likes of you. One thousand of your ships versus one thousand of mine. No tricks or subterfuge, no reinforcements for a coward's win, just a direct confrontation in space. If you best my people, Giznel will be delighted that you defeated the pesky rebels, and lured us into the

open."

Ilthiss snorted with a dismissive tone. "I'll gain no satisfaction by crushing your ragtag force. It is *you*, the very head of power, that I doubt. I have a separate proposal; an honorable one. You come to my base, without any *army* or *backup,* and we engage in ritual swordfighting, tliskis. Unless you've forsaken your weapon ornaments."

"Why would I be foolish enough to come alone, to your territory, for a tliskis duel?"

"I want to show my worth by defeating the supposedly great Isif. Sending your memory to the prey pastures where it belongs. I am no coward that would back down from a fight, especially an easy one against a weak defective."

"Fine. I trust that you are not so petrified of your betters that you would seek a cheap victory." I noticed that the humans looked horrified at my swift agreement, as if they believed it was folly. Whatever the leaf-lickers thought, I had pride left over, and I could tell Ilthiss had too much arrogant confidence to backtrack on his challenge. "I will see you humiliated at my blade, and we will speak about why you should join me afterward."

"Empty words, like all of this talking you adore. When I win, I will execute you. Giznel will know who has slain the traitor from our ranks, and that it was through *my* superiority!" Ilthiss hissed.

The Chief Hunter pounded away at his console, forwarding the coordinates to his base; given that I wished to recruit him to our side, I was not going to take the opportunity to strike the clandestine facility. There were more important enemies than one overly proud Arxur. The less Dominion ships I needed to slaughter to complete my rebellion's aims, the better. Ilthiss disconnected from the call after a threatening roar, as disdain swirled in his eye slits. I surveyed my advisor's expressions, and noticed that Kaisal seemed a bit jealous. The Arxur runt must envy how respectable and powerful a soldier slightly older than him had become through the merits of his strength.

If Ilthiss thinks I've lost a step, he'll be in for a rude awakening; I can be calculating and patient. Too much eagerness to prove himself will mean his judgment is clouded by his anger…that doesn't mean I can't physically prepare myself.

Without any discussion with my advisors, as the matter was settled, I stood from the table. This was not up for debate, since we needed to strike at the Dominion's very foundation. It was time for me to prepare for the confrontation with Ilthiss. I intended to sharpen my sword and retrain myself in the art of tliskis. Achieving maximum readiness for our duel would ensure that the probability of victory was turned in my favor as much as possible.

Chapter 159

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 18, 2137

The humans, and their higher-ups, believed that my tliskis duel with Ilthiss was a poor idea. There was a history on Wriss of high-class society settling feuds through this strength display; though there was no obligation to accept such a challenge, I knew I couldn't afford to be seen as weak by my rebels. Doubt had been sown by my friendliness with the humans, and my personal secrecy to hide Felra's presence in the past. Tliskis was nothing so disorderly and random as a single turn and draw of a gun, as I'd read about on Earth. It was practiced as both a sport for training sessions, and an unequivocal contest of who the better fighter was. It might be the most social aspect left in our society, even if it was just locking swords.

I checked that my ceremonial armor was snug, while adjusting the padding underneath it. The extravagant sword and exquisite gear were fine pieces of craftsmanship, gifts Betterment bestowed upon its worthy hunters as symbols of rank; I wore these for important communications and ceremonies, such as when the Prophet-Descendant issued commendations for terror-inducing raids. It brought back memories of when I executed the Arxur who refused to eat a Gojid, knowing I had to play the fanatic. Slipping into that cruel, familiar persona would be easier than I'd like to admit. After years of practice putting down any comrade who challenged or insulted me, there was no reason I couldn't go toe-to-toe with Ilthiss.

My claws hooked around the ornament case: there were three fragile squares the size of a Terran Rubik's Cube, which were crafted from a red crystal called *kweshua* native to Wriss. The intricate patterns that showed up under the UV lights of a tliskis match made it near impossible to pull off any fakes, not that I would stoop to such means to win our battle. The crystalline squares had to be attached between our chest and our waist, facing the opponent, and not on any limbs. The winner of the duel was whoever could break all of their rival's ornaments first; each time a

crystal broke, the round concluded so the loser could reset their adornment. It was a simple, yet brutal, contest. While attacks toward the head and the neck were prohibited, any other area was fair game for stab wounds.

I can withstand the pain of a few cuts. The question is if my greater experience can counter Ilthiss' faster speed; success will be achieved by outwitting his strategy.

As I approached the fated site alone, there were no treasonous moves from the young Chief Hunter. His morality was self-serving and dubious, but he respected strength and courage; he wanted to best me beyond any doubts, so that meant no tricks were forthcoming. It would be strategically prudent to take me out of the picture and forsake pride, yet his hot-headedness prevented him from suppressing his arrogance here. At this age, in his prime, Ilthiss likely thought he was invincible. His aggression, attempting to humiliate me out of the gate, was almost a certainty. I also believed that if I won, he would humor a persuasion attempt to join our side, per his word.

Kaisal hailed my transport, as it docked with Ilthiss' designated habitat. "Ancestors speed your victory, Chief Hunter. May his blood wet your sword."

"Thank you," I responded, steadying my nerves. "I have a purpose to fight for, beyond myself: the purpose of our entire people. A future that is worth great sacrifices. Besides, there are some selfish gains; I will have your eavesdropping human friends know that I am no *softy*."

"Swinging a sword won't prove that," Olek chirped.

"It will when I swing the sword at your neck, and lop your skull clean off. That would put an end to your conspiracy theories, yes?"

"Actually, no. In the event of my death, I've set up a cache of evidence for various government plots to be uploaded, so that nobody can silence my findings. For instance, I don't trust them doing 'cure research'; they're undoing the cure, but what else are they doing? There's no oversight, and the planetary security excuse is horseshit!"

"What are they doing, Olek? Cloning people for bullet fodder? Putting a kill switch in the DNA of anyone who likes conspiracies?"

“There’ll come a day where they’re able to know everything about you, even your deepest thoughts, just by observing a few elements of your biology, and it’ll be a lot sooner than you think. Laugh all you want, Lisa, but we’re welcoming the death of privacy with open arms!”

I heaved a flustered sigh. “Enough! You are distracting me before an important contest with your incessant chatter. If you ever talk like this on the bridge, I’ll feed you to Ilthiss in pieces myself.”

“Ah, yes, cannibalism is such a funny joke with your hist—”

I disconnected from the channel, hissing with exasperation. At least those two humans being their infuriating selves brought me a notch closer to combat mode; sometimes, I yearned to take a metal blade to their *ornaments*. My facial features hardened into a menacing mask, devoid of emotion, and I disembarked to face off with Ilthiss in person. The Chief Hunter was waiting with the smugness of someone who believed they’d already won; my paw drifted to the hilt of my sword, though it stayed in my scabbard. I wasn’t going to take a premature swipe at him, but the gesture of animosity would get through.

I don’t miss having to communicate in cruelty, unable to hint at any emotions. That said, I was pretty good at pretending, isn’t that right?

Ilthiss smacked his tail on the ground energetically. “Hss, this fool believes he is the finer Chief Hunter. I’m sure he was *great* in the old days, but he’s strayed from the path. I’m surprised he remembers how to hold a sword.”

“What a lovely greeting. I say we go straight to the tliskis, since this conversation is a waste, yes?”

“Works for me. But I’ll have you know that my raid against the Drezjin was sublime; we landed raiding parties, and set off demolition charges in their caves. Burying villages like that, ha! That’s a new one—my idea.”

“How masterfully cruel. I imagine you would not have come back if you managed to keep the planets. You did not even mention the Malti.”

“I’m not idiotic enough to waste resources. Those mindless animals are fighting among themselves, so I hardly need to bomb them. I’m surprised the cowardly prey don’t stampede the second one of their

own throws a claw swipe!"

"The humans can be attributed to this unrest. They put your raid to shame; they dismantled the foundation of over 200 worlds."

"As if I'd believe that. There were none of those Venlil-loving apes in sight."

"That is why they are so terrifying, Ilthiss. You do not see a lethal virus in action; it kills in its silence."

"The Terrans I know of refuse to kill anyone. That was the whole premise of the fight at Sillis and Fahl: warring so those who helped bombed them would live. The enemies of Earth that fell were by *your* maneuvering."

"A point of contention between us. They choose to minimize bloodshed, but I have no doubt that humanity could lay waste to the galaxy if they didn't. The Federation should be afraid of what they tried to awaken. Their cleverness—"

"Isif, no sales pitch from you means a morsel until you have any strength to flaunt. I suggest you think of your last words for when you're executed for your defeat."

"I do not need to waste time preparing for things that will not happen."

Ilthiss growled at me, eyes narrowed to crazed slits. The two of us had reached the tliskis arena. On opposite sides, I could see starting pads scattered a few seconds of running apart; the pedestals in the center offered places to climb or use the environment to our advantage. As the rival Chief Hunter strapped his first ornament over his armored stomach, I considered the placement of my own object. If the ornament broke, even as a result of my actions, it would count for Ilthiss as long as it didn't happen after a tally of mine. Staying up on my feet, and avoiding dropping my weight onto the fragile item, would be crucial. With a grunt of determination, I tightened the band around my sternum, and fixed my ornament right in the center.

In range of both arms to defend, so it's safer from any sidelong stabs toward the hip. If I fall, I can catch myself on all fours to avoid breaking it.

Everything aside from head-and-neck shots, and attacks such as biting or headbutting were fair game, so I needed to watch for any

ambitious tail swipes from Ilthiss. I also should throw in the occasional kick or slash of my own, to keep him on his toes. It might serve me to knock over his platform, rather than contest the elevation, if the young Arxur went for the high ground. I drew my sword with confidence, ready for a frenetic clash of wits and body. Tliskis was an exhilarating format, though I wasn't sure whether my reflexes were quite as sharp as they used to be. Still, my experience was nothing to laugh at, and I was certain I could outthink any Dominion lackey. A cautious approach would take the wind out of his sails, along with granting me insight into his strategy.

I stepped onto the starting pad, and lowered myself to a lunging stance; with my body facing toward the ground, the ornament would be angled away from Ilthiss. The other Chief Hunter was going to meet only my sword, and if my head was facing him, he *couldn't* swing at it without being disqualified. (If my head was intentionally maneuvered in the path of a blow, that was the sole way it could be ruled a fair shot.) I lashed my tail to signal readiness, and Ilthiss did the same. The young Chief Hunter had no sooner smacked his pad with force before he raced toward the pedestals, cresting one as tall as an Arxur without using the lower platforms as stepping stools. He stared me down from the powerful vantage point, realizing I was staying put.

"Coward? What, you've frozen like *prey?* Going to wet yourself and faint?" Ilthiss jeered.

The Chief Hunter lunged with staggering power from his hindlegs, leading sword-first. With the pointed tip blazing toward me, I was doubtful I could parry his blistering momentum. There was no time to sidestep, before Ilthiss landed nearly atop me; careful to keep his maw turned away from me, his sword finished its trajectory. The young Arxur wasn't aiming for the ornament I guarded, instead driving his blade into my thigh. I staggered from the pain, shoving him away with the pommel. My rival landed with grace on all fours, absorbing the momentum through his paws and keeping the crystal strapped to his stomach safe. He took crazed swings toward my kweshua token, and though I saw his tail coming, I could barely fend off the sword by itself.

My hindlegs were swept out from under me with a brutal lash, and it was all I could do to keep my blade from clattering to the floor. Ilthiss scrambled toward me, wrapping his tail around my weapon;

he wrenched it from my dazed grip, ignoring how the sharp edges lacerated his skin. A gloating glint shone in his eyes, as he shattered my crystal into tiny fragments with an unnecessarily forceful swing. I could feel the impact through my armor, and struggled to shake it off. After collecting my weapon, I disguised my limp on my walk to the ornament collection. Failure to reset quickly was considered forfeiture. I donned my new cube, and hustled back to the pad. With how impressive my opponent's aggression was, I could see why he climbed the ranks at a young age.

I lashed my tail. "Is that the best you can muster?"

Ilthiss signaled his readiness, and this time, I opted not to wait for him to come to me. I sprinted toward the pedestal at the same time as him, weaving around the column while keeping low to the ground. The Chief Hunter had climbed the platform again, but was unable to get a clean stab at me. He twirled in my direction, just as I wildly swatted with my sword toward his belly. My rival's blade moved in a blur, an instinctual response; his reaction was near instantaneous, deflecting my brazen attempt. I scrambled backward as he rolled to the ground, and tracked his movements and cues. His legs tensed before he dashed toward me.

Forget the ornament; I need to cripple him, and limit his speed.

I feinted a swing at his crystal, before thrusting my blade into his knee and twisting. Ilthiss howled, but had the presence of mind to hold my blade in his wound. I couldn't pull it away without giving him clean access to my crystal, so I released my grip. Crimson blood gushed from his deep gash as he ripped the weapon out. The Chief Hunter favored his leg so much that he barely put weight on it. The young Arxur crossed my blade with his own, flaunting his dual wielding; I couldn't conjure any unarmed strategies. It might be best to break my crystal on purpose, get my sword back for the next round, and avoid further injuries…but that would leave me with one crystal. Was I that confident? My leg was injured from its own stab wound, though it was less destabilizing.

I was without a weapon, left to defend myself with my arms and a nimbleness that was long gone. The possibility of my total defeat crossed my mind, but I recognized that this was the best strategic option—even if my pride spurred me to keep pressing. The humans had taught me anything could be a weapon…everything but the

kitchen sink. I ripped the ornament from my chest, and hurtled it at Ilthiss; if I was going to destroy it, I might as well rain glass shards on his other leg. Arxur might not have Terrans' arm torsion, but chucking an object at the ground was within my capabilities. The Chief Hunter snarled at my opportunistic forfeiture, losing his footing when pain shot up his good leg. He stayed down for several seconds, still not standing after I donned my last crystal.

"My sword," I demanded, snatching it from his grip. "You cannot fight on, Ilthiss?"

The Chief Hunter used his own blade to prop himself up, and leaned on it to stagger back to his pad. He lashed his tail in defiance, raising his sword into a defensive posture. I signaled my readiness, while collecting my wits; this was now a must-win duel, but Ilthiss looked hobbled after the previous round. As the new sequence commenced, it was my enemy remaining stationary in his starting spot, grimacing as he stood. The Arxur was flexing the leg that the ornament shattered against, but the other limb had lost its functionality altogether after the surgical cut. He brandished his sword with frustration, snarling.

I took my time stalking forward, and kept just out of range, moving from side-to-side so he was forced to turn awkwardly; the longer this went on, the more Ilthiss would be testing his exhausted pain tolerance. I faked a lunge forward, laughing as he made a frantic sword move to block. I moved just within range and swiped toward the ornament, connecting with his metal weapon on purpose. While my rival struggled to bat away my blade, my tail snapped his better leg out from under him—all of his weight was thrown onto the wounded limb, causing him to shriek in anguish. His focus waned as he fell, and I snaked my sword around his to break a crystal. The Chief Hunter took several attempts to get up, and stewed as he realized he needed to walk to retrieve a new item.

"The only prize of a loss is to talk about something that will benefit you," I said. "Forfeiture would spare you the pain; you can go get treatment."

Ilthiss almost hopped one-legged over to his box. "I should've watched for the limb cut a round ago, but an Arxur fights on. All I need is to break one more ornament of yours; you're still slow, old, and *weak* to be empathizing with my pain."

“This is not empathy, as much as an admission of your pathetic state, unworthy of a duel with me. Hurry up, or you will be disqualified.”

The Chief Hunter secured his jaw around his sword to muffle whimpers, and tried to run over to his pad. He crashed onto the starting spot in the nick of time, thumping his tail as he was still on all fours. To my surprise, Ilthiss stayed down this time, deciding he was better off low to the ground. It was a valid play, given that I couldn’t swing at his head from my high angle; however, it surrendered all mobility and exposed many vulnerable spots. My rival hugged his knees to his chest with his tail and arms, shielding the ornament with his flesh. I inched forward, considering my strike with caution. Before I could jab at the sensitive wounded area, Ilthiss sprang to his feet, despite the pain, and swept his sword in a wide arc.

I barely leapt back in time, leaning my upper body backward to protect the ornament. His sharp instrument clanged against the armor of my stomach, and sucked the breath from my lungs from the force. I parried a second attempt to swing upward, and stumbled backward in a hurry, knowing he couldn’t follow my retreat. Ilthiss’ eyes looked crazed and his nostrils flared, before he sank back to all fours, stripped of his willpower. Certain that he couldn’t lunge from this awkward fall, I rushed forward and swung at his wounded leg. The Chief Hunter overcommitted to defending that painful area, allowing me to twist the point towards the true target. My sword glided up just enough to glance his crystal, shattering it.

Ilthiss grunted. “Fuck you. I…only need one hit.”

“Are you delusional? You cannot fight me in this state, and it will only damage your reputation to crawl around like this,” I spat.

“No. I fight…to the last.”

The Chief Hunter hurried over to the box, as best as he could with a maimed limb, and thrashed his tail once he was hunched back over on the pad. I was growing tired, but that just prompted me to end this bout with swiftness; all I needed was to break the final ornament, and I could achieve my goal of persuading him to abandon Betterment. Our cause could use the extra forces a Chief Hunter would bring to the table, and if he agreed to raid Aafa after

hearing about Giznel's arrangement with the Kolshians, that might help the Terrans to focus on the Dominion after this clash. I marched back to my pad, thrumming my tail to start the deciding round. Ilthiss stumbled forward with aggravated hisses. Stealing a page from his book, I waited for him to draw close enough, before using a small pedestal to boost myself up to the highest one.

My rival paused, expecting me to lunge at him. However, not willing to risk my crystal shattering in the chaos, I leapt short of where Ilthiss waited. It was then that I kicked in my last burst of speed, jabbing my sword at his gut with all of my strength and willpower. The enemy didn't bother to defend, instead taking it as an opportunity to go for my crystal. I drove my blade through the fragile kweshua, and heard my own shatter a half-second later. The young Chief Hunter recognized that I'd landed the break first, rather than contesting who won, and conceded the match with a grudging huff. He seemed relieved to be able to sit down and mend his wounds.

"Fine, fine. Spill out why the fuck you think I should side with a defective like you, but I doubt I'll be persuaded. I'll honor my word and let you leave after this is through," Ilthiss growled.

I pulled my holopad from atop my waiting belongings. "I'm going to show you a single video of Giznel talking to the late Nikonus, yes, then the leader of the Federation. If you can't parse that the Dominion is afraid of the Kolshians, and that they don't want us to win, unlike humanity and me, nothing I say will matter. You do have much energy and fight, and I respect those qualities. Betterment isn't worthy of your strength, not when they are the ones in league with *all* of our leaf-licking foes."

"That's preposterous. Betterment would never bargain with prey like you do."

"Good thing I have evidence to prove this very statement. Hear it with your own keen ears, yes?"

The young Chief Hunter took my holopad with reluctance. I watched his facial expression grow enraged, as he listened to Giznel appeasing the Kolshians, and promising not to push too far in the war as to actually win it. It was the humans who Nikonus blasted as a "major setback", and my rebellion which the Prophet-Descendant hated for thinking we could rule all by ourselves. I was ready to

jump in with evidence of our triumphs and innovations, how our side pushed the boundaries of warfare, when this video was over. Something told me that there was a good chance of getting Ilthiss to send his troops to Aafa; this was the fight Betterment shied away from, and weakness was an admission he abhorred.

My success in the duel could give both humanity and the rebellion an advantage in our respective fights.

Chapter 160

Memory transcription subject:*Ambassador Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: March 22, 2137

The first Sapient Coalition convention felt like a trimmed-down version of the Federation's meetings, with the familiar markings of diplomacy I'd seen for years. These were the parties that I'd devoted my life to negotiating with, long before I knew the peaceful union in the stars was a lie. Today's agenda was centered around anything relating to genetic research, though I imagined the Duerten's salvation would be brought up later. The United Nations was owed basic courtesy, after sparing Kalqua, so I hoped the avians had finally seen reason. On a personal note, Noah was present as my aide, though that was a bit reductive of his true purpose; I wished to try to see the species I'd known for years through his eyes.

Humanity had cultivated an array of 38 races, more than just the ones who were recognized across Earth. The Takkan representative's gray hide, hunched over his station, told me their polity was ready to work. The infamous Doctor Zarn who'd cheered on Sovlin wasn't indicative of the larger Takkan species, who'd opened embassies to humans and had been ready from the start to stick it to the Kolshians. The iridescent carapace of the Verin ambassador was visible across from a Terran aide; some predators were less than fond of insects, but this particular race had only ever gone from neutral to friendly. The Letian diplomat, who'd always struck me as a little creepy, seemed to be hitting it off with an entire group of Earthlings. The Drilvar attaché, unsurprisingly, was snoozing on his desk.

For the more well-known members of the audience, the Krakotl, Harchen, and Tilifish had chosen spots in the back of the hall, avoiding wandering UN diplomats. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Yotul ambassador Laulo appeared to be flaunting battle footage to anyone who would watch, making exaggerated gestures to accompany his boastful rhetoric. Mazic Vice President Quipa had allowed a human colonial leader from *Liberty's Bastion* to share her station, which showed respect to the Terran settlement in Khoa's vicinity. The distant Paltans were flipping through a leaflet on their

refugee problem, clearly wanting to insert it into next week's agenda. The Fissans and Nevoks were full-on hawking deals on materials until the meeting started.

If anyone would've told me when Noah first landed on Skalga that all these species would be sharing a hall, and things would seem so normal, I would've laughed. To think Terrans would be so ready to leap into diplomacy, despite their checkered past; it was unthinkable from what we all knew of them.

Noah offered a gentle smile. "It's nice not to have to worry so much about appearances, love. Honestly, the United Nations is probably happy on the conflict of interests issue, from my side, I mean. The Venlil were…special circumstances, or our people would've never allowed an astronaut who's *very* close to the Governor to be handling our business."

"Yeah, I suppose our *connection* was a diplomatic dilemma. Hopefully Governor Veln doesn't prove too much to manage for your successor. He's ambitious."

"Veln is shifty, but two can play that game. If he wants to try to outmaneuver a genuine human diplomat, well, he doesn't know what he's in for. The Venlil people didn't know how lucky they were to have someone honest, feeling, and sincere like you in office. Heaven knows, I wish we had heartfelt people like you filling positions of power back home. Earth will never forget what you did for us, and I'm glad we have you here at the SC now. You care."

"Of course I do. That's why when I heard from some Terran counterparts that you wanted to talk about various gene edits, namely research done to reverse the cure, I made sure to put the Venlil's tampering on the list. And I invited a guest to speak about what affected humans have gone through."

"I appreciate what you're going for, but this might not be the most sympathetic audience for 'a predator wanting to regain the ability to eat flesh.' I'm surprised the UN saw that as a good strategy. Who did you invite?"

"Me," a gruff voice echoed behind me.

Noah failed to mask his obvious surprise, as he sighted a red-haired human with a twisted nose and crisscrossed scars below each eye socket. Marcel Fraser was almost as well-known as my astronaut,

after the footage of his torture was broadcast to billions across the galaxy; if any Terran could be a sympathetic face to the Sapient Coalition listeners, this was the one. There were some controversies around what happened with Slanek, of course, but by all accounts, Marcel was a long-suffering, herbivorous hero. He was also well-acquainted with how Venlil thought, and could frame why it was important to seek remediation, even for a vegetarian.

It's all part of my plan, because what the SC really needs to talk about is beyond cured humans. It's about any omnivores forcibly converted into herbivory who want to go back.

That idea would be a touchy subject, given how taboo predator diets had been throughout our lives. It took concentrated efforts to turn a blind eye to how Terrans operated; the first time Noah had a "ham-and-cheese" sandwich around me back at his place, I'd felt my years of brainwashing try to desapientize the man I loved. On the bright side, at least it wasn't blood-soaked, carcass munching like I envisioned that first time on Aafa together. If someone told me I'd accept nourishment of that kind, years ago…but it didn't matter. I understood the nutritional requisites some species had, and whether the intent was to go back to omnivory or avoid allergic reactions, other SC races should have a say in their diet too.

I extended a paw in the human handshake gesture. "Marcel! I'm delighted to see you again, under much more pleasant circumstances than on war-torn Earth or the prior time at the outpost."

"I'm glad to be doing something to help, Gover…Ambassador. It does sting a little that all of these listeners will just see me as the poster boy of human victimhood," Marcel sighed. "I'm here to make everyone feel more sorry for me than they already do, right?"

"Put your chin up, unless *you* feel sorry for yourself! The Federation has done shitty things, and several of those shitty things happened to you: you are the perfect spokesperson for millions affected by this. But why we're really here is to fix this mess, and you're here to convince them it needs fixing. Like it or not, you have sway over choices made at the highest echelons of government. Clear all your uncertainty and decide how you plan to use that power."

Noah whistled in appreciation. "What she said. It's good for us to see you here, standing tall, from where you were not too long ago.

You don't just earn pity…you're a damn inspiration, a testament to the human spirit."

"I don't know about that. I've always tried to do right by people, and believe me, there'll be no theatrics needed for what this *cure* has taken from me." Marcel forced a smile, shoving his hands in his pockets. His hazel eyes swirled with brooding intensity. "I volunteered for the prototype antidote. The risks are worth it to me. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate all our researchers, but having the Archives spell out exact gene edits is what made it feasible. I wonder whether you'll pursue reverse mods for the Venlil."

I tilted my head to one side. "Yes, Noah and I were just discussing that. It's definitely something almost every Venlil can agree on, and I have Veln's blessing to declare our intention to move forward with the reversal. On the debate stage, he acknowledged that we both see this as important to our people. The UN has been tabulating which changes need undoing for us since the Archives."

"That's awesome. I wish Slanek was here to see that. He couldn't stand…seeing what they did to you."

My astronaut scowled. "I don't support what your buddy did, but I get it. It infuriates me that Tarva's lived her whole life, deprived of basic things, because someone hundreds of years ago decided to kidnap her ancestors' children and transform their genome."

"It wasn't so bad until we knew what had been taken from us," I sighed. "But don't worry. I'll do what it takes to see that future generations aren't shackled, for humans or Venlil. The stage is all yours, Marcel, if you're ready."

The red-haired human nodded. "No sense delaying. I'll be going—short and sweet."

I offered a polite wave to the former UN soldier, who'd been cured during an incident at the Battle of Mileau. What I hadn't told Noah when mentioning Venlil genetic reversal was the decision I'd reached for myself; with my safety on the line, I wasn't sure he'd approve. The Archives files of "45-G" detailed the exact modifications the Farsul made, with unique specificity, even compared to info on the protovirus used for different cure bioweapons. That entire file cluster was a changelog for my species. The Terrans had run simulations suggesting they could reverse the gene edits for Venlilkind, but it might be difficult to persuade others

of my kind to trust those supposed *corrections*.

For starters, we would never enjoy the benefits of properly developed limbs or olfactory organs. Still, if we wanted to erase the Farsul's impact on our society, the majority of the herd needed to choose to go back to our empowered selves. It was a tough sell when it could have consequences for us in the present, and entailed having our DNA altered by another group of aliens. The success of the reversal, and any side effects on newly-grown children, wouldn't be seen for years. That left the…other part of my plan. It was going to be one fireball of a topic to broach with Noah; I hadn't asked how the human felt about children. Obviously, it wasn't possible between the two of us, so starting a family never had a reason to come up.

Noah would make a wonderful father, but even if he's somehow okay with this outlandish idea, it won't truly be his kid. Bloodlines are important to humans, as I understand it.

Marcel stepped to the podium, clearing his throat. "Hello. Ambassadors of the Sapient Coalition, it's an honor. I've always loved the diversity of life on my homeworld, and though finding it in the stars has brought a ton of suffering for me and my people, it is wonderful to see dozens of races that do share our vision. Maybe other humans haven't told you this, but we revered and feared extraterrestrials when you were the stuff of myth. I find that our fears may have lacked…*imagination.* An attempt to destroy our planet, followed by a bioweapon designed to force fundamental changes upon us, bested our spooky sci-fi tropes."

The Thafki ambassador raised a paw. "Excuse me? You're Marcel, right? The one that was beaten half to death?"

"Um, of course, I should've introduced myself. Most of you know me as the exchange participant who was taken prisoner, and got this face makeover from a Gojid's claws, with a complimentary ten days of starvation. Fun times. What you may not know is that I was later dosed by an aerosolized version of the cure, which triggered a severe initial reaction that left me bedridden for weeks. Breathing in vapors of animal products…it can send me into anaphylaxis. I carry an epipen around at all times just in case now, even here."

"You're saying you're a forcibly converted omnivore, like us," Krakotl ambassador Nuela chirped.

“Precisely. I’m here to lay out why that’s a problem: a public health hazard for anyone who’s had the effects of this bioweapon passed along. I was already a vegetarian, yet the slightest trace of anything that’s an animal can kill me now. I can’t live on my homeworld, around my family. I shudder to think how many unexplained incidents occur on worlds of fully cured species. You can have sincere intentions never to go near *predator food,* but a bug accidentally gets in the meal or an animal brushes up against a crop you don’t wash fully? Problem. It could be you, your children, or anyone you care about; everyone’s biology reacts differently. Forced herbivorism cannot be allowed to exist in a free society.”

Mazic dignitary Quipa looked displeased. “I’m not an…omnivore, but wouldn’t undoing the cure mean people could eat meat? That really isn’t acceptable in our cultures. Maybe it should just be left alone, and the cured peoples can be more careful with food prep, rather than all of us opening the door to dead meals.”

“Look, I care about what I put in my body too. I always understood how you feel about predation, and how the idea of it sickens you. But if you believe in something this strongly, you won’t change your mind just because you have the *choice* to change. You believe that these societies are moral and righteous due to dietary abstinence, yet they don’t have the free will to do anything else: they’re forced to comply. How is it righteous at all when it’s the only path you can take? All the cure does is risk the lives of people who would supposedly stay the course regardless.”

I raised my tail. “For my fellow delegates’ information, Marcel will be on a human trial of a cure reversal drug, to test its efficacy. I can speak to the fact that Farsul gene edits are never harmless, and always about controlling anyone who defies their indoctrination.”

“Thank you, Ambassador. I’ve said my piece, but I wanted it to be clear how much suffering it’s caused me. I don’t feel that I deserve this. I don’t feel that your grandchildren deserve this either. I’ll take my leave, and according to my notes, you’re supposed to have a short recess to discuss this? Please support safety and choice.”

The red-haired human ducked his head, and some of the more Terran-familiar individuals tried to make smacking sounds against their desks to imitate applause. It was always refreshing to see bits of human culture catching on; I appreciated clapping as an

unmissable way to let the speaker know their words were appreciated. Part of me wondered where Marcel Fraser—and Slanek—would be if not for his capture all those months ago. Another aspect of my brain wondered where the Venlil would be now, had we never been turned into our present state. I didn't know if it would be a better outcome, but it would be more authentic.

Marcel is right about none of the gene-modded species deserving this. We need to make this right for the next generation. I have to hope Noah takes what I'm about to say well…

"Hey, Noah?" My chest was a bundle of nerves, though not in the same way as when I first accepted the binocular-eyed captain's hail. "I'm sorry to spring this on you, but can we have a word somewhere private? There's something I need to tell you."

The human flinched. "Uh-oh. I don't like the sound of that. Have I done something wrong? Are we breaking up?"

"What? No! It has to do with…what we're about to talk about, when I take the stage. Please, just…follow me."

I scurried out of the meeting auditorium, finding my way to a private discussion chamber; Noah looked apprehensive, but shut the door behind him. What if he was offended by what I was about to propose, or despised the idea? Would he get angry that I recklessly wished to be among the first to have my gene edits undone, and bring an uncrippled child into the world? My ears bunched up with frustration, as I struggled to think how I would explain my sudden shift in future plans. The astronaut was growing more concerned by the moment, so I knew I needed to just spit it out.

"I'm getting the gene edits reversed. I want to be one of the first, to show my people they can trust it. Like Marcel said, the risks are worth it, to see what was taken from us undone," I blurted.

Noah tapped his chin with his fingers. "Tarva…you know I'll support your decision. You should have bodily autonomy. That said, it won't change anything about your present circumstances, now or ever; it's about the future generations. Is it worth the risk when there's no, um, offspring?"

"Yeah. About that."

"Oh. I…I see. It's wonderful that you're thinking about motherhood, though I admit I'm caught a bit off-guard. I, um, I know I should

never say this aloud, but aren't you past birthing age? You know, haven't you hit menopause? Fuck, this is awkward."

I recoiled in confusion. "Menopause? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Noah's expression became more flustered. "It's…human women, er, they stop getting periods and being able to have children during their…middle age? Gah, I'm going to stop talking. I really should've researched more about Venlil by now, but I didn't even think of *that*."

"That's not a thing for us, or any other species that I've heard of. I love you humans, but you're extremely strange on an anatomical level. Also, what's a period?"

"Maybe…maybe you should talk about this with Sara? I don't think I'm, um, qualified, in this department. But, I don't have a problem with you wanting children, per se. It's just, you know that's not something that could happen between a human and a Venlil; that's why you pulled me aside, right? Are you asking for an…open relationship? Frankly, I want to be exclusive."

"I'm asking if you would be okay with me seeking a reverse-modded donor, so that you and I could raise a child, *uncrippled and free of gene edits,* as our own. If that would violate what you see as exclusivity or as starting a family…"

Noah was quiet for a few seconds. "Sorry, I'm processing that. Tarva, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. If this is what you want, then we'll make it work. I'll love our little Venlil goober with all my heart."

"I'm…so relieved that you're okay with it. I know it's a lot to ask, but I need us to be a part of building that future generation. Our legacy."

"I guess peace in the galaxy and saving the human race won't be enough of a legacy?"

"Never hurts to add a little more. With you by my side, I feel like I can always go beyond what I ever dreamed was possible. Now let's go get the SC on our side. I can't wait to tell them all about our plans to restore the Venlil to our true selves."

My human wrapped an arm around my shoulders, and I gave him a grateful ear flick for his unwavering support. As long as the

predator stood beside me, no challenge was insurmountable. Together, we returned to the main venue to rally our allies around the gene reversal program that would play a huge part in our future lives.

Chapter 161

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 23, 2137

The march to Aafa defied expectations, with the lack of open confrontation we faced.

The Kolshian Commonwealth had a vast expanse of territory; as the original founder, their most storied colonies predated the Federation itself. Their population had necessitated spreading out across the stars, so even after a hypothetical conquest of Aafa, it would have to be seen whether the scattered billions would surrender. The tentacled bastards used every system of their official twenty light-year territory bubble, which was how their manufacturing power was so absurd. It was also why I expected us to be stopped by border outposts like the Gojids had…but those sat unguarded, with only automated turrets and lasers left behind. The stationary targets could be picked off at little risk to us.

Within inhabited systems, FTL disruptors were running, which impeded our journey. We chose the pathing that traveled by the fewest settlements, but were forced to burn days in sublight travel. Wary of the Kolshians using humanity's tricks against us, we kept our own anti-FTL signals online; the last thing we needed was asteroids being warped atop us, or ships leaping right into the center of our ranks. It might've been possible to take the colony worlds, except that Kolshian bombers were clustered around their own planets. What was the point of that? I grasped that they only cared to defend Aafa, but this maneuver must've been with the intention to paint humanity as butchers.

Perhaps it's a bluff, but even if we got the UN to agree to glass the colonies, it'd waste our munitions. Maybe it's some cold-blooded sacrifice to tilt the scales at the main event. Taking the outpost worlds by foot isn't viable, when we'll be lucky to successfully occupy Aafa.

I couldn't imagine how the Kolshians on the ground felt, seeing their own government using them as hostages. Several humans suspected a trap in the planet's bounds, whether it be from planet-to-surface munitions, kamikaze bombers, or hidden orbital defenses. We opted to stick to the mission parameters, and limit our

engagements before Aafa. I couldn't help but notice the barebones defenses by the backwaters, with patrols seeming to be canceled. Was the Commonwealth planning to go out with a glorious last stand? Had the cutoff from over 200 allies caused them to conserve their numbers for their home system?

Whatever the reason for the quiet deployment, it felt like the calm before the storm. It was strange that they'd expended so much manpower on failed boarding ambushes, though as the galaxy's most populous species, lives seemed to have little proportional value to them. The Kolshians knew we wanted to occupy their world, so targeting manned ships would mean those vessels needed repairs. What was the point of stalling our advance beforehand if they weren't impeding us in surrounding systems now? I couldn't figure out what their angle was, but they'd been buying time for something.

"Well, this is it." I verified the sensor calibrations, as we dropped outside the FTL disruptors around Aafa's system. "I'll have a read on how many ships they have soon. Ralchi, I hope it's not *millions*. They've always been hiding their true capacity."

"What if it is millions? Carlos can't exactly say 'Shoot them all' to that," Sovlin grumbled.

Carlos scrunched his face in confusion. "Uh, why not?"

"Do we have the fucking ammunition for that? Even this atavist Yotul can count bullets."

Samantha swept her auburn hair out of her eyes. "We've been planning to get these fuckers for a long time. Time to fix the galaxy's crazy alien problem. I've got a bullet with Melbourne's name on it for the first Kolshian to walk in my sights."

"Likewise, I'm doing this for Leirn. We cleared those colonizers off our planet once," I said. "There's nothing you can do to these bastards that would match the thousand-year sum of their evil."

Tyler snorted. "First, I don't disagree, but it's not the damn Olympics. Before ya aliens ask, that's a big athlete contest with the shiny medals and the swimmers and the hurdles—"

"We didn't ask."

"Huh, that's rich comin' from the living geyser of fun facts. See, much better name for him than *atavist*, Sovlin."

“Hmph. If I have to fight alongside a total barbarian, I’m glad it’s this one,” the Gojid admitted. “I never would’ve imagined how much I’d care about a Yotul and literal fucking predators when I turned myself in. Though you all leave much to be desired, you’re my crew.”

Samantha glowered at him. “I don’t know why I expect a racist war criminal to give proper compliments, but you’re making me glad we’re about to see action. Please dole out some ‘now shut the fuck up’ orders, Officer Cardona.”

“Fine, listen up, here’s what I need handled. Onso, numbers. Sovlin, tactical suggestions,” Tyler barked. “Good luck. Y’all know what we’re up against. The squiddies got home field advantage and they’re packing heat. We scrounged up over 100K of our own ships, so that’s the good shit. But it’s us, a smaller number of Yotul Technocracy ships we could bring in, and another bit of Sapient Coalition padding. There’s been calls to other powers, but…”

“We don’t have them now,” Carlos sighed. “It’ll be alright. Whatever they have waiting for us, I know tactics are on our side.”

“Well, we haven’t unlocked an infinite ammo glitch in reality, so tactics won’t matter if they’ve got us too outgunned. Plasma has to recharge, and the rest of our munitions ain’t gonna replenish on the fly. Onso, do you have the enemy’s numbers?”

I straightened my ears, waiting for the inconclusive blips to solidify into a proper count. Our glide had almost brought us within visual range of the nearest ships, but there was a larger formation scattered through the system. Orbital ring by orbital ring, it became clear the Kolshians hadn’t left any stop along the way uncovered. Pushing through to Aafa itself would mean vanquishing a brutal onslaught at every step, and I couldn’t imagine other surprises weren’t lurking for us. My readout sourced data from our vast array of vessels, running predictive analysis to fill in the gaps from vague, far-off points. My ears pinned back in unease, as I watched the total number of hostiles climb. Worst of all, a solid chunk of the foes in our vicinity couldn’t be matched to known shadow fleet markers.

There were an estimated ninety-six thousand vessels from the manned, public Kolshian armada, and over two hundred thousand that *were* shadow fleet: a jaw-dropping number that dwarfed our attack force. However, I was watching the full enemy tally climb

past five hundred thousand before it leveled off; the computer didn't buy that the rest were Commonwealth-made. It racked its data banks for other alternatives, including the simplest possibility that some of their two hundred allies had come, despite the catastrophic cyberattacks. Yet the homogeneity of the ships suggested it was a single entity, which led my brain to a startling possibility.

Which parties in the galaxy have that many ships? I'd assume it was the Arxur Dominion, except that I don't see how the grays could've been persuaded to fight alongside Federation prey.

"Let's start with the easy news, while it's running a search for more comprehensive analysis," I said. "We're looking at about five hundred thousand hostiles in system."

Tyler narrowed his eyes. "*That's* the easy news?"

"Well, it's not a million ships like Sovlin was afraid of."

Sovlin waved his claws angrily. "Oh, half a million ships, that's so much better. Wait, what if Onso applied sensor filters by mistake? Maybe he's overselling it."

"The very first time we worked together, you accused me of that same shit. My work is damn good, good as any human here. If you can't see that, you're the neverpouched primitive."

"I'm sorry, who was the captain of a warship? Who's trusted for tactical advice?"

"Captain Monahan?"

"Technically, that's a correct answer, wiseass," Samantha laughed. "I don't see a problem. We beat 'em with numerical odds against us many times over, 'cause the best minds are on our team. How is this any different?"

Carlos scowled at his fellow guard. "This is *it.* Every trick they have up their sleeves, they're going to use on us. We expect some of those plays to be dirty as fuck. They also have defensive fortifications to support their ships all across the system; there's a reason the plan is to manually take over their moon's orbital defenses. The brass must think we can't get close enough with bombers."

I flinched as my console flashed, confirming my suspicions. "I'll tell

you what else is different. Two hundred thousand of the ships are from the Arxur Dominion."

"What?!" Tyler hissed.

Sovlin's spines bristled with dangerous lividness. "Those fucking… the heartless grays do know who starved them, right? And after everything the Arxur did to us, to the herd, Aafa is working paw in paw with them? It wasn't enough that this all started because of the Federation; they *have* to keep it going? I know our suffering means fuck all to them, but the grays and the Kolshians really are one and the same!"

"Keep your head, Captain Racism. We know there's no bar that's too low for them. I can't say I expected this, but I also think the Dominion is less dangerous than the shadow fleet. We still have a mountain to climb…but it's now or never. When the other two hundred species get back on their feet…"

"Those numbers would be a million plus," I finished. "Insurmountable. Channel your anger, Sovlin, and use it to kill them all."

The Gojid gritted his teeth. "With pleasure. It's time to correct my final mistake: years of service to this lying, Sivkit-brained Federation."

"What's your tactical input?" Tyler questioned.

"Sir, I feel that we should target these Dominion ships. No, this isn't solely due to my personal vendetta with those bastards. They're manned ships, but ones that are more competent than the Kolshian crewed vessels; it'll keep us clear of the lights-out drones too. Our weapons have the advantage, so we can cut the grays down to size."

"Onso, do you agree?"

I masked my surprise at having my opinion solicited. "I do agree. I don't know what these Dominion crews were told, but I'm sure several aren't thrilled with their present alliance. There appears to be a group massing by the nearby gas giant, attempting to spring an ambush if we leave them be. We don't want to lose their signatures, and have gravity fields muddy the waters."

"Then I'll advise the captain; she'll handle coordination with our allies. Find us a prime target on sensors, Onso, and center the viewport on them."

“Consider it done.”

As Tyler strolled over to Monahan’s post, I brewed in my unvoiced doubts over our numerical disadvantage. It seemed like we didn’t have enough ships to take the system, under the circumstances; the best option might’ve been to circle back, and avoid a confrontation that was slanted so heavily against us. However, another part of my brain knew this was the best that the odds were going to get. Now that the Federation wasn’t donning the guise of a peaceful organization, they could crank out more ships than humanity could with the sheer scale of their empire. If we let the Kolshians have time to get new manufacturing plants off the ground, there was no way for the Terrans to match it.

It’s impressive how quickly humanity ramped up their shipmaking capacity, putting Earth’s entire industrial might into overdrive; going from zero battleworthy craft to thousands upon thousands, whether by slapping drives on donations from allies or by splicing drones together from scratch. That said, it’s now or never for taking Aafa…and hopefully, the Federation…down.

Tyler gave me a confident nod upon his return; my selection had been a Dominion bomber that was showing battle scars on its hull. Much like our own, the enemy craft had undergone repairs, but nothing could truly be put back to the same quality after it was broken. Other sections of our invading fleet were designated to separate tasks. Yotul Technocracy ships were joining Terran drone advances on shadow fleet hideouts, pushing deeper into the system. The meager assortment of Sapient Coalition forces were challenging Kolshian-crewed ships, pitting the two weakest links against each other. That last one seemed like a tossup of who stampeded first, though I supposed it was derisive to think that way.

“Small laser station powering up from within the ring debris,” I barked, spotting the warning on my screen.

Captain Monahan pursed her lips. “Don’t deviate from our present course. Lock plasma fire on the Dominion hostile, and prepare for evasive maneuvers if we’re fired upon.”

As our powerful railguns faced off against the Dominion’s pair, I trusted that we had the edge on range, while lacking recharge speed and anti-evasion measures. The true advantage was the shield-breaking missiles, which were dumped into the gas giant-adjacent

enemies. Unless the Kolshians had done something so reckless as passing along their replicated technology to the Arxur, the grays wouldn't have an answer. Unshielded foes were forced to pirouette behind cover of the planet's rings, where ice particles and small rocks absorbed several beams. We didn't have a clean shot, while they could pick their angle from a strategic location.

To make us feel more surrounded, station-based lasers torched a path through Terran ships; they had enough energy to cut through several of our craft, shields and all, with a single blow. Our advance turned to address the troublesome planetary defenses, chucking any high-yield bombs we had in the station's direction. Its defenses were able to cause some premature detonations, though the indirect exposure was enough to clear its surrounding debris. That left a clean ticket for an antimatter munition to punch through, blowing the installation to Ralchi's domain. While we'd been able to mop up that issue, I could see why larger versions around Aafa would be a major problem. The Kolshian homeworld must be a fortress.

The Arxur picked the perfect location to set up shop, and compensate for their weaknesses. They might be lazy in the present day, but they're not stupid; there's no question why they've been able to terrorize the galaxy for centuries.

"We still have a long way to go after this, sir," Sovlin advised Tyler, amid nerve-wracked claw chewing. "They've been able to mitigate their losses, and we've taken some hits. If they whittle us down at this rate, all the way to Aafa…we won't make it. We need to rethink our strategy; I don't know, figure out why the Dominion is working with the Federation at all? I fucking hate the idea of working with them, but I don't see how we can take them on; turning them might be the best tactical advice I can give."

Officer Cardona looked surprised by that suggestion. "Thank you for your objectivity, Sovlin. Intelligence back home has been apprised of the Dominion's arrival, but we don't have enough information to try any outreach yet. I'll be candid with you all; we could use double the ships at our disposal to have a viable chance. Wish we'd got more than 38 fucking allies, 'cause it's real David vs Goliath."

"Real…what?"

"Little guy vs big guy. We just have to keep fighting, and pray for a turnaround. We'll take Aafa…or die trying. That might be bleak,

but it's God's honest truth."

With those ominous words hanging in the air, I felt inertial dampeners rushing to keep up as we zigzagged; dodging plasma required constant surveillance of target locks and inbound munitions. Interceptors deployed in front of us, as an enemy missile homed in on us. Weapons had only just gotten our plasma back online, having to rely on kinetic turrets in the downtime. We fired off another shot, and a glancing plasma response from the Dominion caused a slight dip in our shielding. Finding cover was the best way to hold our own. The Terran fleet had deployed a few barrier walls to replicate the gas giant ring's advantage, but those could only absorb a few hits. It was nothing compared to millions of fragments, created by nature, to hide within.

I squinted at the sensor screen for any useful insights to pass along, and my tail drooped as I spotted ship activity from the edge of the system. The Kolshians had more vessels at the ready, warping in to encircle us? It had looked like they vacated every outpost or colony garrison in their possession, but I supposed that had been a trick as well. While our Terran comrades had left a rearguard, anticipating this strategy, we were already stretched thin against *half a million* defenders. The idea of juggling more combatants and flanks would put an even greater strain on our resources. As much as I'd been excited to take the fight to the Federation, I wasn't sure this was a battle we could win, if the enemy still had *more* resources to summon.

"Onso, you alright? You look like you just saw a ghost," Tyler growled.

I attempted to correct my downcast expression, but my body language stayed deflated. "I did: *ours.* I'm counting thirty thousand new Dominion signatures, freshly warped in at the edge of the FTL disruptor boundary. For every few we cut down, they could just bring in more. There's no telling how many ships they really have."

"That changes things. We have to win this fight, but no commander would advocate suicide for our fleet. If the other side's true numbers are still in question, this battle is already lost. I'll bring this to Monahan's attention, and maybe, like Sovlin said, we do have to rethink our strategy. I hope we can find another way…I'll keep you apprised."

I ducked my head in acceptance, and watched the primate hustle over to the captain to impart the worrisome message. Optimism was becoming a colossal struggle, as we swerved across the battlefield to maintain our very lives. Once we found a path to cut through the Dominion's ring fortress, I had faith that we could start pushing our momentum in this arena. The question was how many engagements we could survive before our fleet collapsed under the pressure; if tons of enemy reinforcements were sitting on the sidelines, getting to Aafa might be too much of a hurdle for even humanity to surpass.

Chapter 162

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 23, 2137

The captain bore a somber look on her face, as Tyler first imparted the news of Dominion reinforcements from the direction of Kalqua. There were a few hushed and hurried conversations, as I strained to pick up the comms chatter. While I couldn't hear what our personnel were saying, I could see the humans' faces cycling through different emotions. The bridge crew were dividing their attention between this new situation, and waging battle against the Arxur ships entrenched in the gas giant's ring. Our progress was slow and steady, careful not to overplay our hand; their cover was being chipped away at, though it cost us a few ships. Plasma arced from our railgun, seizing a clean angle that I'd forwarded through my analysis of the battlefield.

I tried to focus on that single enemy erupting into smithereens, and the increased ability we had to avoid hazards from our closer vantage point. The Dominion didn't budge from their positions, as a few allies fell; our own ship was the recipient of an attempted target lock, likely the same foe that singled us out for a previous plasma strike. I put my head down, and searched for whichever miscreant was gunning for us. Through close inspection, I located a small warship hiding in the shadow of a larger ally. Not wasting a second that could mean the difference between life and death, I forwarded the new target to weapons.

"Plasma is recharging, but with those nanodrones we stocked up on, I say now's a good time to use them!" I shouted.

Captain Monahan angled her ear toward me ever so slightly. "You heard the Yotul. Unload the nanodrones, and deploy a mini-missile salvo to distract them in the meantime."

The Terran commander's addition to my plan was sound, but it was disappointing that I hadn't presented the solution myself. The new Dominion blips, thirty thousand of them, were distracting me; a part of my brain was mapping their trajectory, and had reached a gut-wrenching conclusion before my conscious mind connected the dots. As the mini-missile delivery vehicles wove around the larger

hull, and their payload battered the shieldless hull of the foe targeting us, I checked to confirm my instinctual suspicions. All of the new reinforcements were closing in on our manned vessels to aid their Arxur brethren. We had chosen this engagement because it was the most viable option on the competency gradient.

Have we walked into a trap? What do we even do; peel back and push through the ambushers, weapons at full blast, to regroup? Summon drone backup, when our automatons are already contesting the shadow fleet?

The nanodrones reached their intended target, punching through the drive compartment; there was nothing the Arxur harassing us could do to avoid going up in flames. The explosion lobbed icy debris from the planetary rings at nearby comrades, which damaged several of its allies. I was certain that Monahan would advise other ships to pivot to nanodrones, but that tactic didn't address the inbound problem. We had a few minutes before the Dominion completed its pincer movement. While I racked my brain for out-of-the-box solutions, the sensors readout glitched. The unmistakable raiding vessels switched over to green, friendly markers.

"Tyler, thirty thousand Arxur vessels are coming in hot on our heels," I announced. "I advise immediate action to address this threat. Also, the enemy may have tapped into our systems, since they're suddenly denoted as friendlies."

Sovlin huffed with skepticism. "Did you press the wrong button by mistake? All that bouncing and fidgeting you do on your hindlegs…"

"I didn't touch it. You are disrupting matters of the gravest importance; does Tyler need to remove you from the bridge?!"

"Well, I spoke up to offer sensical advice. Unless it's that nasty Chief Hunter Isif's ships, it's obvious Dominion ships aren't friendlies. And Isif is buddy-buddy with Zhao, so I'd venture since we didn't know they were coming, it's not him. The grays don't have cyber capabilities like Terrans, as Onso should know; hacking is a fantastical notion. That leaves the possibility that the markers were mislabeled by the Yotul, or by someone else in a high-ranking position. Would any humans betray their kind to aid the Arxur?"

Captain Monahan snapped her head toward us. "No. We're pulling back to fall in line with the new Dominion ships. We have new intel

being forwarded that says they're here to take Aafa…and are very much against cooperating with the Kolshians. I'll be hailing the new arrival's commander to gather info for the fleet; XO Schwartz has control over battle stations. Comms, extend the hail."

I blinked in confusion, doubtful over whether to trust these sources. Sovlin could have a point about power-hungry traitors to the Terrans' cause, though I knew very little about this "Isif" he mentioned. Tyler told me that he was an ardent supporter of some Archives gray, but I didn't know the specifics. However, it wasn't impossible that this sensor anomaly was an inside job to sow confusion, a betrayal from within. As was evident in the seediest parts of Yotul history, all it took was one person in the right spot who was tempted by grandiose offerings to sell out a movement. If the primates were too trusting of the wrong people, our vessels could be waltzing blind into a crossfire!

"Our intelligence hasn't dropped the ball yet, Onso, knock on wood. If this was entire agencies' conclusion, there must be some basis for it," Tyler reassured me.

Carlos dipped his head in agreement. "Maybe it's a new addition to the Arxur rebels. I thought they preferred insurgent tactics to direct engagement, but maybe this group buys into the prideful aggression doctrines."

"Aggression sounds great. Hell, as long their bloody guns point in the right direction, I don't care if they follow the whims of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," Samantha huffed.

Our warship reversed its momentum with gradual thruster changes, and glided backwards; the hostile Arxur wouldn't concede their strategic location by the gas giant to pursue us. Of the thousands of Dominion ships in this cluster, we'd picked off a few percentage points. I could see nearby remains of a few of our craft too; we hadn't escaped unscathed. Even with shields, a few well-placed hits in close succession would turn a Terran vessel to scrap metal. Captain Monahan was aware of the singular focus required during a space battle, which was why she was in a hurry to complete the call to our mysterious ally. Seconds passed without a response from the thirty thousand ships, who were almost upon us. If there was no answer from this gray bunch, it would certainly elevate my suspicions.

Any genuine aid would want to coordinate with their allies. What could possibly be the delay?

Before my doubts could creep back in, regardless of the humans' faith in their intelligence, a strange Arxur blinked onto the screen. Abundant scars laced his face, which was an unusual greenish-gray. Rather than standing in their typical display of strength and ferocity, this commander was in an unusual seated position. If he was answering our hail, this must be the Chief Hunter presiding from a command ship; given that Sovlin wasn't reacting with recognition, this wasn't the "friendly" Isif. The carnivorous alien bared his teeth in a true snarl, rather than the relaxed teeth flashing Terrans favored.

"Humans. I am Chief Hunter Ilthiss, and I am here to help you deal with these *traitors* to Betterment," the Arxur growled. "Betterment is an ideal of cruelty and dominance. A friend of yours reminded me of this; I was able to contact Chief Hunter Usliff from my neighbor sector, before Giznel could get to her with that plea."

Monahan narrowed her eyes. "Why are you helping us, Chief Hunter? We like to know who we're fighting alongside."

"Usliff and I both wanted to show these Kolshians we don't need their permission to do anything…and that we don't work with *prey!* I've obtained a copy of some damning footage between those codgers Giznel and Nikonus, but the Dominion ships have disabled communications for that reason. The command ships are jamming inbound signals to be sure, under the guise of cybersecurity. I could convince many others here to turn if they saw this one clip!"

"There's no way to get them to accept file transfers or hails, without hacking their systems and forcing them to listen. If we had malware on their ships, I suspect it would've been activated the second our brass heard the Dominion was here. You'll need to fight your comrades. Will that be acceptable for you?"

"Hss, you speak as if I care about my associates, human. I'm not so pathetic. They are in my way, they are defending the leaf-licking scum who think they can control us, and I'd rather fight with a sniveling predator like you than join the piss-ridden Federation. At least you don't shy away from a threat."

"I think the Federation finds us humans to be most troublesome. Clearly, the Dominion's not a fan of the strength and gumption we

bring to the table either. If I may, Chief Hunter, do you know how the Arxur were persuaded to work with the Commonwealth?"

"Hrr, they claimed that you will eliminate any threats to your claim over the prey animals that populate the galaxy. Therefore, the Arxur will not have a right to exist, and pooling forces with an undesirable herbivore is to protect future raids. They say it's about the right to cruelty, but it's really about control and a lack of ambition. Isif told me that you'll back a society with a different despot to Giznel; I'll answer to no more cowards. That senile, defective Chief Hunter has the right idea with a power grab, but the role seems better-suited to me."

"We can settle the future of the Dominion after the Federation is gone, Chief Hunter." *The perfect tone of diplomacy from Monahan, for this self-centered individual.* "This is a chance to defeat them entirely, and stop the Arxur from being directly controlled by the herbivores who insulted you…by trying to starve you. Who do you want to be the one responsible—a hero even—in their defeat?"

Ilthiss' eyes glowed with malice. "Generations will know of my *power.* A true Chief Hunter would never fight for the Federation. We're taking the gas giant; if you leaf-lickers want to come with us, you better keep up!"

The Arxur disconnected from the hail, and Captain Monahan allowed her neutral mask to fall. She closed her binocular eyes with a bit of weariness, no doubt from her negotiating attempts all being centered on crazy people from deranged regimes. That would tucker anyone out, and challenge their professional tone. I could at least rest assured that this newcomer's motives checked out, so human intelligence had read the situation correctly. The Terran manned ships merged with Ilthiss' vessels, coordinating with Arxur commanders over comms; with thirty-thousand new craft on our side, we should be able to clean up the inferior force much quicker.

I checked my sensors readout, gauging the other battlefronts. "Sir, an update on our allies' status. The other Yotul ships have pushed deeper into Aafa's system; if I'm reading this correctly, it seems Terran drones quietly slapped on their own particle beams. The shadow fleet is sustaining disproportionate losses. The Sapient Coalition is struggling against the enemy's manned ships, though, and appears to need urgent backup."

“We can’t afford to divert any resources. We’re committed to pushing forward with Ilthiss, and if the A-team is succeeding against the shadow fleet, they should keep the foot on the gas too. Taking out those ships is the top priority, after all.”

“What happens when the SC ships fall on their first engagement, of many? We’re at the outer bounds of the system, not Aafa.”

“If we spend this battle bailing them out, we won’t be able to focus on our goals. They knew the risks. They need to hold their own, unless we get more magical reinforcements out of left field.”

While I knew that my human exchange partner was correct, having only two main groups to deploy would hinder our capabilities to address evolving threats. It was a shame that herbivore-crewed militaries were always bumbling fools; I think that knowledge colored Terrans’ initial perception of me, in this role, more than the primitive accusations I faced elsewhere. Determined to set myself apart from other ex-Federation volunteers, I hunched over the sensors to find us an edge. The green dots denoting Ilthiss’ ships were throttling ahead at full burn. It was convenient for us that they sent themselves to the front lines to absorb the worst of the incoming fire.

This is a novelty, seeing Dominion ships fighting against themselves; untold aggression canceling each other out. Ilthiss will want to push into the ring for close-range angles, blasting his opponents with kinetics and plasma they can’t dodge. It’d be a no-win bloodbath, except that we can seize the distraction for mid-range strikes.

“Ilthiss is likely to get up close and personal with his old friends,” I advised. “We should be careful not to hit him…”

Sovlin grumbled to himself. “Should we now? So much for ‘Wise sage Sovlin, handle tactics.’”

“*Ahem.* Don’t hit him, because we need his vessels alive to increase our chances during later engagements. I suggest we hold our fire to precede him by just a little bit, so the enemies are distracted when he pulls up alongside them.”

Tyler grinned with approval. “Good work, Onso. Chart Ilthiss’ intercept vectors, and inform us when you estimate a ship is ten seconds from deploying kinetics.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thirty-thousand overlapping lines blinked onto my sensors readout, but I knew our vessel needed to protect one; other Terran craft would handle the others. I applied filters to chart vectors only for Ilthiss' speediest ships, and those who were the closest to the gas giant's ring. After combing through the data, and allowing our new allies to get nearer to the target, I pulled up a nimble warship's pathing. It was flying headlong into a barrage of plasma, while we conserved the brunt of our weaponry for the climax of this aggressive strategy. The fresh Dominion ships had an abundance of missiles to unload at the Kolshian-allied hostiles. Scores of casualties were racking up on both sides, but the arrogant Chief Hunter had almost gotten his ships inside of the icy debris.

I pulled up one vessel; we could just barely catch an angle of its belly. "We can blow a hole in the underside of this one, or at least make it startle. Plasma needs to get a shot off in the next few seconds."

"Weapons, fire on this target now," Monahan ordered.

My ears perked up as our beam was dispatched with impressive haste; somehow, the humans hadn't sacrificed anything in the way of precision. Our Arxur foes were paying more mind to their kinsmen than the UN fleet hanging back, perhaps under the assumption that the debris lent them enough shelter to disregard us. Their negligence allowed us to tear a gash in the mark's belly, compromising its integrity. Terran vessels around us fired off similar shots, landing strikes wherever we could. A few kills, along with many damaging hits, were notched on our enemies. Several enemy guns, which had been preoccupied raining hellfire on a charging Ilthiss, zapped plasma in our direction in response.

The Terran manned fleet was able to avoid prolonged fire, since Ilthiss regained their attention with his arrival. The scarred Chief Hunter had lost thousands of ships with his recklessness, but it was one way to flush the Dominion from the icy rings. The Arxur friendlies stormed the natural-made fortress, cycling between their three main munitions as fast as biologically possible. More missiles were spit off from close-range in an overkill, wasteful gesture, while turrets revved to life to pump kinetics across entire ship bodies. Plasma had barely flashed from twin railguns, before it collided with our enemies. Ilthiss' strategy was to shoot everything his force had, all at once, without giving them a second to breathe—and it

was working like a charm.

Now that our plasma has recharged, another supporting volley should cause them to crumble. Even the Arxur themselves didn't expect this *much aggression from one of their own. This Ilthiss gray is unhinged; not my ideal choice of ally.*

I served up another target on the platter, and weapons needed a quick go-ahead to sizzle energy toward the fray. The Terran fleet had drifted nearer, allowing a shorter time to impact. I had the viewport focused on our current mark, as human technicians blasted plasma straight into key systems; the craft somehow stayed together, but the gaping hole through its hull left it listing off-vector. Ilthiss' people were on it in a second, killing a vessel that was already out of the game for good measure. The Dominion's numbers had dwindled in light of our new arrival, though they pumped out desperate last shots toward the new Chief Hunter. Our crazy ally was able to pounce on the final remnants, with our help, but the swift victory was at the cost of an eye-watering *ten thousand* of his ships.

"Ilthiss' help won't last long, if he keeps bleeding ships like this." I adjusted the viewport toward the open expanse of stars, as our warship banked to join our allies deeper in the system. "Speaking of allies, that Sapient Coalition situation I mentioned has gotten worse. We should help them."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "In a shocking turn of events, our alien help leaves much to be desired. Except for the Yotul ships; you're pretty much as good as ex-Feds get."

"I'm so flattered. Not that you're completely wrong. With *help* like this, we certainly could use more ships. We just made it past their first bastion of defense, and the numbers won't get any prettier."

Sovlin tapped a claw against the screen, finding faint indicators from the edge of the opposite side of the system. "Then you're going to like this. Already marked a tentative green: computer must think they're not Kolshian or Dominion. We should ask these guys to head toward the bulk of the action, rather than drifting way out yonder."

The first wave of reinforcements that were on our side had quieted my doubts, but the Gojid war criminal was speaking as if more new additions were joining our fleet. I snapped my attention to the activity that he picked up, seeking out supplemental information so

I could brief the captain on their origin. The subspace trails were a bit strange, and would take a moment to untangle from this range, but I was confident I'd figure it out. Whoever this latest group was, I was hoping it was someone more reliable than gunslinging Ilthiss. Humanity needed proper aid to bail out their Sapient Coalition partners.

Chapter 163

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

Now that humanity and its allies were here at Aafa, I could feel the weighty gaze of history upon us. The chance to free our societies from the Federation's grip was both terrifying and inspiring; the Kolshians had stripped us of our own cultures, and thrust us into a censored life of suffering. A government that valued control above all else must not be allowed to exist. Just as I had once considered humans a menace incapable of feeling, out to conquer and pillage, I saw the same creatures that *deserved* anguish fighting in this system. The Dominion and the Commonwealth, paw in paw: both responsible for my tormented lot in life. If it weren't for Recel, I might stand with Onso in wanting Aafa glassed.

The personalized anger always shaped my strategizing for the better, though the Yotul had been piping up before I could assemble my tactics. I guess that primitive wanted both jobs at the sensor station. However, I had no intention of taking a backseat during the attempt to vanquish the Kolshians; my eyes stayed alert for anything useful that could kickstart new ideas. While monitoring the sensor feed for data relevant to our tactical options, fifty thousand friendlies at the edge of our detection range caught my attention. In the span since we first arrived in system, our fleet had now gained eighty thousand new participants—nearly doubling our original count.

Of course, I'd like to have Ilthiss' head on a pike, but thankfully, that warmongering Arxur seemed capable of killing off the beasts under his control by himself. One-third of his force dying back at the gas giant saved human lives, so I *could* tolerate grays getting blown to dust in our stead. That said, I hoped the computer wouldn't identify these new arrivals as more Dominion monsters, answering to some other Chief Hunter with a vicious ideology. The confusing bit was that they were denoted as friendlies; if these were Federation or Arxur vessels, their signatures would have been matched to the ones in system. Had someone from the Sapient Coalition decided to send more ships?

I snapped my head up, catching onto a remark from Onso about needing more ships. “Then you’re going to like this. Already marked a tentative green: computer must think they’re not Kolshian or Dominion. We should ask these guys to head toward the bulk of the action, rather than drifting way out yonder.”

The Yotul had been pensive since the battle began, likely worried about our odds of taking down this army—a joint force from the two greatest powers in the galaxy, which shattered the records for any battle force. Onso had understood that our outlook was grim, going in; I think the primitive saw this as a suicide mission. Reality hadn’t looked upon us with kindness, at first. The Terran shipyards at Proxima Centauri, built up adjacent to a colony with temporary housing, and the cumulative manufacturing power of Earth held significant output for a single species. The predators seemed as if they could do anything, when faced with a challenge to their kind, yet it paled in comparison to the system-filling numbers we were up against today.

I knew what hopelessness looked like from gauging the morale of my Gojid crew, back when we squared off against the Arxur. The charge we led against the cradle’s raiders had a few realists, like Onso. It was only when Ilthiss showed up that I saw the first glimmer of hope within the Yotul, and with fifty thousand new additions to our roster, optimism was gleaming in my crewmate’s eyes. I could see that the marsupial was trying to temper his rising spirits; it was important to verify that these were friendlies. If these latest additions were truly on our side, we might be able to fill the system with our own fleet.

There is the issue of the two hundred thousand enemies that are shadow fleet, but it sounds like the Yotul and Terrans have their number. Something about beams of particles.

“Before we hail these fellas, we should know who they are,” Tyler decided. “For all we know, it could be some trick by the Kolshians to dress their fleet up as Venlil ships.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “That would never work. The Venlil gave us most of their military. Fifty thousand ships don’t grow on trees.”

“Are you sure about that, Sam?” Carlos teased.

The blond-haired officer blinked in irritation. “Enough. You get my point; we can’t afford to be wrong here. Who are we dealing with?”

“Just one more second, sir.” Onso furiously applied some filters to the subspace trail data, before his optimism seemed to fizzle. “Oh. That’s…it’s the Duerten Shield.”

I shot a withering look at the Yotul. “Why are you saying that like it’s a bad thing?”

“Because, like all Federation militaries except for the one we’re squaring off against, they’ve shown they’re completely incompetent.”

“*I* was in the Federation military.”

“My point stands, old man.”

“Insolent prick. Do you know who was the only captain to spot the Terran ambush on Gojid border outposts, *despite* their stealth deception?”

Samantha curled her nose at me. “Why are you saying that like it’s a *good* thing? Besides, maybe my memory’s a little hazy, but didn’t you do nothing to intervene? Something about expecting us to be unable to resist slaughtering the civilians on your colonies, so you camped by an inhabited world instead of your base.”

“I might’ve been a little offsides…my point is, I saw through your tricks, so I was somewhat competent. Not all Federation captains are the same.”

“Uh-huh.”

Tyler was visibly trying not to laugh. “This really shouldn’t be amusing, should it? Guess compared to the shit that came after, it’s the good old days. Now sit back; we’re going fast as we can to help out those SC ships. Unfortunately, Onso has a point about Federation captains not…holding up under pressure. They need us.”

“Damn right they do,” the Yotul declared. “Well, now that they’re here, don’t we have to contact the Duerten Shield? Make sure they don’t wander off unsupervised?”

“Er, I’m sure we wouldn’t put it that way, but yes. It’s a good number of ships, and maybe this time will be different. Believe it or not, I heard they held up surprisingly well defending Kalqua.”

“Cornered animals, sir. Sovlin probably needs that concept explained, since prey could *never* hurt anyone just because they’re out of options.”

I scoffed. “I don’t take explanations from medievalists and microwave chefs. Go make your fucking call.”

Officer Cardona ran a final confirmation with Onso of the data, before passing along the news of Duerten Shield reinforcements to Captain Monahan. The UN commander gauged the distance between us and the floundering Sapient Coalition; the manned Kolshian vessels were making quicker work of our direct allies than the Shield’s last stand. Pairing the two groups together could grant them more backbone…and adding the Kalqua natives to the mix took our tally above 180,000. The real question was whether the avians were finally friendly toward the humans, or whether they’d cause fractious disruptions. The tone of this conversation would indicate their disposition toward us.

Without humanity’s kindness, the Duerten species would be in the same positions as the Gojids post-cradle, if not worse. I don’t see how they could find it in their hearts to still harbor hatred for us.

A Duerten commander blinked onto the screen. “We were hoping a Yotul captain would speak to us about our integration, but I suppose a predator will suffice. We’re here to make Aafa pay for what they did to us.”

“Good,” Monahan growled with a neutral expression. “If I may, weren’t the Homogeneity’s numbers devastated at Kalqua? I thought you only had—”

“A little less than ten thousand ships total. I do know my own fleet strength. Look, we lost more people than you did on Earth. I’m so *angry* I can’t think straight. If the Kolshians attacked us again, we’d be fucked anyways, so we might as well point our guns at them, here and now.”

“Understood. The other forty thousand are Shield allies?”

“The Leshee felt guilty for not sending any ships to Kalqua, some grudge about being iced out of the Federation military. The Jaur saved most of their fleet for today, because, surprise, they wanted to help out with this anyway. The—wait, why am I telling a predator this? I’m sure the motives of forty-four species, and which ones turned up, don’t matter to you. What registers is violence, and there’s forty-thousand Shield ships that want to dish that out.”

“You know, we’re happy you’re here. We’ll forward the coordinates

of our herbivore allies' advance, and you can team up with them. They'll fill you in on any details you need. Oh, and Commander?"

The avian stiffened. "Yes?"

"Humanity is not your enemy."

"We're…starting to see that. Thank you for saving us."

The Duerten struggled to say those last words, and hurriedly disconnected from the call. Samantha chuckled with disbelief; it seemed the avians hadn't put the entirety of their predator distaste aside. However, I trusted the Shield to fight by our side, as long as it meant dishing out retribution to Aafa. The look in the Homogeneity commander's eyes when she spoke about her anger struck a chord. It wasn't dissimilar to how I'd felt after losing my family, stewing in hatred and a desire to make the responsible parties suffer. In her case, that grief was fresh. Trusting the Duerten not to do something rash would be foolhardy under the circumstances.

"We need to keep an eye on them. They're not thinking straight," I said.

Carlos nodded in agreement. "I know. Every human on this ship knows how they feel. Many of us came out of Earth's attack willing to do anything to the Federation."

"However much they're not of sound mind now—" Tyler began.

Samantha sighed. "Or ever."

"—we need their numbers. Their desperation could make them fight better. You heard it from their mouth; they know if this battle isn't won, they can't defend Kalqua anyway. Their fleet is in tatters."

Onso flicked his ears. "The Archives told us how loud and individualistic they are, and it shows. They do crazy, illogical things during bursts of emotion. Assassinating Nikonus because they were angry over their uplifting? Leaving Kalqua with zero ships to their name now?"

"Let's not tell them that," I responded. "It won't matter as long as we win this fight. Unlike the Kolshians, the United Nations isn't a habitual practitioner of genocide."

"Yet the Federation said we'd conquer and enslave them all." Carlos shook his head, as if disappointed by our continued reality. "They

accused ‘predators’ of what they themselves do. I wonder if they hate us because our darkest moments are a mirror of their *finest*.”

Samantha patted his shoulder. “Oh, you sweet little thing. They hate us because of our eyes and our food, and don’t need another reason. They wanted us to be conquerors; it just turns out the system we’re conquering is theirs. Now, let’s go bail out those bumbling SC idiots.”

“This should be an ‘easy’ stop, but let’s not get complacent. Man your stations, everyone,” Tyler ordered.

Yotul Technocracy ships and Terran drones were also moving their vectors toward us, after tallying a resounding victory against the shadow fleet. The Sapient Coalition bunch were the last group still engaged, for our initial skirmishes by the outer planets. A light formation of manned hostiles were giving our herbivore friends a world of trouble; tactics on both sides had broken down into a disorganized shooting match that was tilting toward the Kolshians. The SC’s numbers had been nearly halved by an enemy band much smaller than them. It wasn’t worth waiting for the Duerten Shield, or our autonomous allies, to join our rescue.

Human crew members can handle a straightforward task, and do a clinical job cleaning up this area. The quicker we deal with this, the sooner we can push toward the inner planets.

Onso pulled up an enemy target on-screen, as we coasted within range, while I monitored whether any foes turned toward us. The Commonwealth vessels seemed a bit dispirited, like they believed that their government was sacrificing them to the cause. With those extenuating factors in mind, it wasn’t a surprise that they were slow to react. If Recel were still alive today, would he have been called home and roped into “serving his nation?” I almost felt guilty as we nabbed our first mark, nailing them with a plasma beam that was all too easy to land.

The Sapient Coalition regained a bit of their senses, with humanity coming to their aid. Our herbivore allies regrouped enough to coordinate fire on specific Kolshian vessels; I passed along which ships were being targeted by our allies, so we could pool our resources on the ones they neglected. The manned enemies turned their last missiles toward human-crewed ships out of spite, bitter at the predators who sealed their suicide mission. The barrage could

be batted aside by most of us, except for smaller vessels that had too many inbound explosives centered on them. With the rapidly-dwindling number of Commonwealth survivors now out of projectiles, it simplified cleanup even further.

A small handful of Kolshian ships attempted to flee, and were pursued by the fastest Terran craft. We couldn't allow them to fall back, bolstering the largest contingents near Aafa. I knew the point of the staggered resistance was to soften us up for when we reached the inner sanctum; excessive planetary defenses and the best Commonwealth-Dominion vessels would be waiting. Having less threats to contend with improved our odds, given the daunting scale of the task ahead. Taking the Federation founder's world wouldn't even be the end of our mission.

"Finish off anything with a Kolshian warp drive!" Monahan barked. "We have new orders from command. While it's ideal to split our forces, UN manned ships are being paired with the Shield and the Coalition. We can't afford to leave them to their own devices, so we stick to them like glue! Navigations, sensors, find us the best point of attack by the inner planets. Weapons, bring me an update on our ammunition stores. Comms, patch us into allied channels and keep us synchronized."

A chorus of assent came from the stations the captain called upon, while the last Kolshian resistance in this region was mopped up. It was troublesome that our Sapient Coalition allies had bungled such an easy assignment; I hoped the furious, revenge-seeking Duerten Shield would have a higher level of competency. If none of our partners could handle their own, our warship would be strapped to an anchor. Human leadership needed to have the good sense to cut them loose, if it came down to it, and make the requisite sacrifices to win this battle.

I peered at the sensors screen. "I see we've plotted an intercept course, to rendezvous with the Duerten Shield. After that, I say we go toward that oblong rocky planet…Caato, if I remember its name. An unimportant research colony with a few hab modules; unless you want to bomb it, I wouldn't concern yourself with settlements aside from Aafa."

"Sovlin is right," Onso agreed. "It's a prime target. There's a mix of Commonwealth manned vessels *and* Dominion ships. I imagine

neither side likes that, so they might not be fighting…or coordinating at their best."

"Precisely."

Tyler ducked his head. "I'll forward our suggested destination to navs, along with the location of known enemies. Anything else we should know?"

"Well, just some tactical advice, sir. From what we can see on here, the enemy resistance only gets thicker as we go forward. I recommend keeping the SC and the Shield in supporting roles."

"No, that won't do. The Duerten won't be happy taking a backseat here," Onso challenged. "They want revenge for what was done to them. We already established that they're highly emotional, and not thinking straight."

"Then what are you suggesting? We let them take the lead, despite their questionable competency?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting, Sovlin. Let the Duerten pick their role, and see how they fare. Caato is the test of whether it's best to let them go off on their own."

Tyler pursed his lips. "I don't see a better option to keep them in line, and getting in their way could make them turn their guns on us. This might convince them we're on the same side. I'll fill the captain in; she can have someone that's an *herbivore* ask their decision on how we want to play this."

"Let's hope this goes better than we all expect," Samantha grumbled.

As the sensors officer marched off for a conference with Monahan, I found myself questioning the Yotul's suggestion. I hated to admit that Onso's advice was normally sound, but in this case, his idea could be detrimental to the fleet's success pushing deeper. It would be enough of a challenge to protect weaker allies without putting them in charge of our next move. The humans were attempting to manage a tricky situation, with the numerous parties for and against them in the battle, yet this seemed like a ludicrous gamble. I hoped that the Duerten Shield's combat actions today would be as bold as their words.

We needed not just to win this next stage of the clash, but also to swing momentum to our side heading to Aafa.

None of this factored in Ilthiss' ships, which had moved off on their own vector, rather than aiding our Sapient Coalition friends. That bloodthirsty Chief Hunter must not have wanted the appearance of teaming up with prey. There was no question that the Duerten would not appreciate our Arxur aid. I didn't envy the Terran brass, trying to juggle these different interests. If anyone could keep this tinderbox from erupting into flames, it was humanity; the predators had been agents of peace since day one on the galactic scene.

Chapter 164

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

The crewed vessels of the Terran fleet advanced on Caato, where the unlikely Commonwealth-Dominion alliance waited. On a separate course, UN drones and Yotul Technocracy ships were flushing the shadow fleet out from the system's asteroid belt; their band had been saddled with Ilthiss, since their particle beams allowed them to match his aggression. I was hopeful that the Chief Hunter's ships would fall over the course of the battle, even if humanity didn't believe that was the ideal outcome. However, the fifty thousand Duerten Shield vessels surging ahead toward the rocky world, which was somewhat similar in use to Sol's "Mars" as I understood it, could be a problem too. The avians couldn't afford to throw away their numbers, both for our sake and Kalqua's.

We were a seed's flight away from Aafa, after soaring through the moderate resistance near the gas giants. More vessels were amassed by Caato, but the bulk of the enemy fleet was anticipating our eventual arrival at the Kolshian homeworld. Their hope was to whittle us down along the way, despite how that knocked tens of thousands of ships from their half a million strong tally. The Terrans needed a full docket of information for the upcoming engagement, to stave off any traps or devious intentions. I surveyed the Shield with interest, trying to gauge what their strategy would be for engaging the hostiles. With their hulls packed into our ranks, it was then that I noticed a strange anomaly on the nearest scans.

"I've noticed something unusual about these vessels, compared to the standard Duerten make," I piped up. "It's as if they've stapled some mix-and-match storage bays to the bottom of their ships. High amounts of mass concentration there too."

Onso tilted his head. "Were they trying to turn standard warships into bombers? The mass distribution is congruent with what I'd expect for a few standard antimatter missiles, typically used in extermination fleets."

Samantha's eyes narrowed. "Like the extermination fleet that came

to Earth."

"Or to Kalqua, even if they didn't go by that moniker. I will note that there's some variance between Krakotl technology seen on Earth, the Malti tube bombers specialized to colony foundation, and the Duerten's rather antiquated technology. The blast radius of their bombs is limited by how inefficient the subatomic collision mechanisms—"

I jabbed my claws at the Yotul. "You don't need to hijack my observations by regurgitating science textbooks. Stop trying to prove your intelligence through rote memorization."

"I'm providing insight into the destructive capacity of different species' weapons technologies. Ralchi forbid I find it interesting!"

"Here's some fucking insight. Any antimatter bomb can flatten a city, but the Duerten's warheads don't have quite the same reach as others when they blow up. Isn't that simpler?"

"Simpler isn't always better, Sovlin. You just don't want a *primitive* to know anything more than you. If I was a human, you'd gush about my intelligence."

"Well, who'd expect a predator to behave that way? The bar is lower for them. Um, no offense. Humans just tend to have very specific interests, like how Tyler likes murdering fish and shooting things in simulated games."

Tyler scowled at me. "I have other interests. Sorry that I can't gush about philosophy and zoology like Marcel. You two need to quit your bickering, especially at a time like this, and conduct yourself with proper discipline. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," I grumbled, as the Yotul said nothing. "I think you caught the point buried in there. Despite his excessive information, Onso is right about the Duerten strapping themselves with as many roughshod bombs as they could."

Carlos' brown irises darkened. "Do you think they intend to bomb Aafa, sir?"

"I think so. I also don't see how humanity could stop them without throwing ourselves into the Kolshians' tentacles, so we should cross that bridge if we get there. For all we know, the Shield flounders and panics at Caato," Tyler answered.

I chewed at my claws. “But you said you thought they’d fight better because of their desperation, sir.”

“I said they might. I don’t think it does any fucking good to raise tensions before we even get to Aafa, because after seeing they taped bombs to their bellies, I’m certain they’re off their rockers with rage. Our orders are to destroy enemies posted in this area; focus on that.”

If the humans didn’t want to address the Duerten’s vindictive plans, then I was content not to dwell on the prospect of bombs. While the thought of innocents like Recel getting caught in the crossfire hounded me, the personal resentment in my heart yearned for the Kolshians’ to suffer, as we all had. Our lives meant nothing to them, so my sympathy was a bit strained. The Yotul would be able to ignore the looming problem as well, given that his opinion was in favor of glassing Aafa. What was Onso going to do, beg the Terrans to stop the Shield from completing his desired course of action?

What we need is for the Duerten to carry their weight in combat. The United Nations doesn’t endorse or crave genocide, but I can’t imagine they’d be sacrificing human lives to protect Aafa.

Caato’s cratered surface was becoming more detailed on the viewport, with a few artificial lights enlarging where hab modules had been installed. The settlements on its surface were cramped structures packed beneath a translucent dome, relying heavily on electrolysis of recycled water to create oxygen (I could read up on such topics, just like Onso). The Dominion and Commonwealth hadn’t struck defensive positions tailored toward protecting Caato’s orbital range, due to the *negligible collateral* on the surface. Both entities had a blatant disregard for sapient lives, so I supposed they deserved each other. More concerning was the fact that we barely had a numerical edge over their sixty-odd thousand encampment. Few manned ships remained in operation for the Terrans, so the bulk of our advance was the fifty thousand Duerten arrivals and Sapient Coalition survivors.

There weren’t enough of us to keep the Shield in check, even if we were meant to babysit them. It was a small relief that the Duerten weren’t charging in blind, like Ilthiss had. That said, at least there was a guarantee with Arxur ships present that the birds could deal some damage in the attack. The Coalition and our revenge-seeking

allies were huddling together, thronging toward the hostiles in a massive group. I wasn't sure what the avians were doing, but I still was worried about how the Terrans would handle an assault against civilians. Months ago, I could've never imagined that my main concern, standing among a human crew, would be that their *mercy* would cause quarrels with other powers.

"Well, that doesn't look like any bombing formation I've ever seen. If this is a practice run for bombing Aafa, you'd think they'd be more spread out," I grumbled.

Tyler crossed his arms, inspecting the viewport. "The Sapient Coalition has tipped us off that they plan to 'mob' certain ships, as one big cluster."

"To me, it looks more like a clusterfuck," Samantha chimed in.

"I'm inclined to think the same. They were using plenty words related to herds or herbivores too; I don't know what the Duerten fed the SC, but they lapped it up. What kind of military strategy is this? Do you have any idea, Sovlin?"

Realization pinged at the recesses of my memory, triggered by those keywords. Were the Duerten trying to employ prey strategies from nature against predator warships? I combed my brain for hunting safeguards in ancient Gojid history, which they taught about in evolutionary science class; the obvious factor for us was the spines, but the Shield hadn't taped any bristles to their craft. Somehow, I doubted the efficacy of that defense mechanism when the beastly "bite" was from white-hot plasma rather than teeth. This ploy seemed to center around safety in numbers, relying on the herd for protection.

"I think this is an attempt at communal defense?" I posited with uncertainty. "It's not unheard of for herd animals to team up against predators. Also, clumping together as a herd makes it difficult for the predator to target any one prey creature."

Tyler groaned. "It also makes evasion impossible when your fleet is a giant target!"

Onso squinted at his sensor readout. "Swarming might be the only way they can get kills in a calculated way. You saw how the Sapient Coalition performed as a *proper* military. At the very least, it won't be any strategy our enemy is expecting from us…so it could

surprise them. Like we did with Ilthiss, we can use our ships to distract the Kolshian-Arxur team."

"I don't think just shooting at the enemy will be enough to distract them from the giant ball of incoming ships," Carlos pointed out.

"That's why you humans need to pull one of your crazy stunts. Like moving another miles-wide moon?"

"Onso, that requires a ton of planning, and days-long acceleration in subspace."

"I know, but my point is I'm sure you can repurpose something as a distraction."

"What do you expect them to do, materialize an asteroid belt around Caato?" I hissed.

Officer Cardona's icy eyes lit up with sinister delight. This distinct snarl was an expression that played on a human's face when they had a diabolical idea, a wry proclamation of mischief. Nothing that would benefit an enemy's welfare ever followed from that predatory marker; it usually indicated that a Terran had dreamt up some novel way of killing, or disrupting the natural order. For all their noble sensibilities, that was the expression of cruelty that lurked within them—perhaps even the bloodlust they didn't believe they had. I shuddered to fathom what Tyler's latest idea might be, and felt my spines bristle from the elated malice radiating from his binocular gaze.

It's been a long time since humans triggered my instincts, even during combat or when they're killing others. Somehow, right now, I sense that it's justified to fear their creative capacity within the field of death.

"So the Duerten want to swarm the enemy? I think we can do that one better," the sandy-haired officer chuckled. "Nanodrones. We still have *plenty* of them."

Onso's eyes also gleamed, unafraid of the scheming human. "Instead of using them as tiny impacts, where they're unable to be shot down, we fashion them into…"

"Locusts. Bingo."

Despite the fact that I was at a loss, Samantha and Carlos both seemed to catch on to what the exchange pair were talking about. Officer Cardona stepped over to Captain Monahan, passing along

his idea in hushed tones; I tried not to sulk that the nerdy marsupial always understood the predators much better than me, a veteran starship captain who was supposed to be a brilliant strategist. What had the Yotul exchange program been like? If Onso was a proper indicator, their response to military innovations seemed to be, "Wow, cool! Weapons are *awesome*! We should play with these killing machines for our ships too!"

My attention turned to the viewport, not wanting to express my inadequacy by asking for more details. All I'd grasped was that the Terrans found a new use for their nanodrones, aside from the standard "death by a thousand scratches"; given that Tyler selected the word swarm, I imagined he had a larger-scale plan for them. Hopefully, the Duerten wouldn't be rubbed the wrong way by us springboarding off their idea with a better version. It would take the onus off them, depending how successful this distraction was: human *distractions* tended to morph into the main event, as an impetus toward chaos.

According to my sensor contacts, the primate vessels were unloading their nanodrones and pooling them into a giant clump. All it took was a contribution of about a hundred microscopic robots from each of our ten thousand-odd ships to cook up a monstrosity. The swarm looked like a dust storm in the void, a primordial-looking blob that challenged all notions of size and scale. There wasn't a crew in the galaxy that was trained for a million tiny dots descending on them as one. This tactic had the downside of making it possible to target the nanodrones with conventional weapons; the Arxur and the Kolshians wasted no time lobbing plasma, bullets, missiles, and anything else they had in stock at our "distraction."

"Well, they certainly seem distracted," I commented.

The wicked grin hadn't left Tyler's face. "It hasn't even started raining nanodrones over by Caato yet. We'll have enough striking their hulls at once to rack up some kills."

The Duerten's herd formation wasn't attracting much fire, allowing them to move forward with their group attack. Terran manned vessels pressed ahead alongside the avians, but kept our distance from their single cluster. Our plasma guns were charged, and Captain Monahan was waiting only to draw within range to give the

order to fire. The Kolshians and Arxur were preoccupied with the tiny specks zipping toward them; the nanodrones could gather significant velocity in a short time frame, due to their insignificant mass. Our foes couldn't cut down enough of our swarm, and there were mere seconds until its impact.

Every time I think that humans are normal people, and don't have any particular propensity to evilness, they conjure up something like this. Something that nobody else in the galaxy has ever heard, or even thought *of.*

I trusted humanity to utilize their creations for good, but I was suddenly very grateful for that empathy which might drive a wedge between us and the Duerten Shield. This latest plot exemplified how dangerous they were when their hunting prowess was allowed to flourish. Shivers ran down my spine as nanodrones struck home, in quantities that defied imagination. An assortment of holes blossomed on enemy vessels along their entire length, with our robots hammering drive compartments through brute force. Explosions besieged the Kolshian-Arxur line, as shielding and plating were both helpless against an attack of this magnitude.

While the nanodrones were continuing to pelt them from all sides, encircling and swallowing the enemy whole, we took the opportunity to deploy shield-breaking missiles. This softened the defenders up even further for the Duerten Shield, whose herd moseyed ahead to mob small segments of remaining hostiles. Humanity targeted foes away from our allies' line of sight, picking off any dazed opponents with plasma. The numbers of Caato's garrison had taken a significant hit from the nanodrone swarm, and a second wave of attack was on them without a moment given for recovery.

It was a brutal trouncing, even as they tried to fight back in desperation. The panic among the enemy formation wasn't just in the prey-crewed Commonwealth vessels; even the Dominion's order had disintegrated with a million mites of dust pummeling their craft. The Kolshians and the Arxur didn't team up with each other well to begin with, so the result was predictable. We were facing isolated survivors, hurling munitions at us and the Duerten in a blind frenzy. The Shield sustained several hits due to their strategy of flocking together, which had made them an unmissable target. That persuaded the hostiles to concentrate munitions on the herd

rather than us.

“The nanodrone swarm inflicted a catastrophic amount of casualties,” Onso remarked. “Formation outside of Caato is dwindling rapidly, down to a few thousand. The enemy appears to be targeting the Shield primarily, by virtue of taking out as many ships as possible.”

“The Duerten could mitigate their losses, except some vessels seem disinterested in targeting the last enemies.” Tyler pointed to a Duerten breakaway sect on the viewport, and his scowl intensified as the Yotul zoomed in on the movement. “Shit, they’re moving toward the planet! I don’t exactly see any new hostiles coming up from the surface.”

Terran manned vessels zipped closer to expedite the cleanup of the last few hostiles, but our sensors station was entranced by the Duerten’s erratic behavior. Homogeneity ships had made a beeline toward Caato, breaching orbital range with as much speed as they could. I flinched as their plasma guns revved to life, cutting down a lone evacuation transport. It made sense that most Kolshians stayed put, since they assumed humanity would ignore the colony in favor of Aafa. However, from what I’d guessed the avians’ wishes to be, that was a grave error of judgment.

Gasps of horror sounded from the predators across the bridge, as the Duerten unloaded antimatter bombs without hesitation. Where there otherwise would’ve been celebration as we cut down the last enemy ships in the area, there was instead a somber silence. The wait for the inevitable felt both long and short, as warheads hurtled toward each settlement on the colony. Orange flashes popped atop the surface’s beacons of artificial light, though when the radiance died down, Caato’s electrical glow did not return. The importance of the colony clearly hadn’t mattered to the Shield, as much as the fact that there were *any* Kolshians living down there.

The Duerten Homogeneity had broken off for a hot-headed action of their choosing, not even waiting to secure orbital victory to move on to bombing the civilians. The avians had snuffed out every settlement they could spot on Caato; if that didn’t make their intentions for Aafa clear, I didn’t know what would. Our plans were also set in stone, pledging to displace the Commonwealth government and bring their homeworld under our control, *alive*. My

crewmates had stated that we needed the Shield's numbers, and couldn't afford to clash with them due to our conflicting ideas of justice.

Where each side stood and what was at stake was as unambiguous as the result of the Battle of Caato. The question was what humanity would do about the murderous atrocity their allies had just committed.

Chapter 165

Memory transcription subject:*Ambassador Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

The first meeting of the Sapient Coalition was in the past, but now more than ever, my sights were set on the future. Humanity's assortment of allies had been very receptive to the idea of fixing the Venlil's hindrances, since in our case, it had nothing to do with us not being herbivores—it was about us not being meek, deformed herbivores that followed the Federation's guidance. Noah and I returned to Skalga with a new lease on life; a week from today's date, I was set to be the first Venlil to have my gene tampering reversed. It would be televised through a press conference, which Governor Veln insisted on being a part of for optics. My summons to the governor's mansion had mainly been to brief our leader on what happened during the convention, but Veln saved the topic of today's referendum for last.

Veln flicked his ears placidly. "Thank you both for coming to fill me in. I made sure to expedite a planetwide vote on the planet's name, as promised; I'll abide by the results, regardless of my distaste for *Skalga*. I'd also prefer not to keep Venlil Prime around, so the options were 'Skalga' versus 'Other or Stay the Same.'"

"It'll be wonderful to shed another part of the Federation's influence. That was our point of mutual agreement," I replied. "I was planning on submitting my vote online, as soon as we're done here."

"Don't worry, I won't keep you long. Noah, I can see your feet blatantly pointing toward the door. A sign of where you wish to be?"

The astronaut grimaced. "Do I have to answer that?"

"No, but may I remind you, I didn't ask you to come. When Tarva brought you, I let you tag along as a sign of goodwill toward your people. I'd say I'd prefer to talk to my SC ambassador without a foreign government's agent in the room, but I imagine she'll tell you everything anyway."

"For your information, I can keep my work separate, especially

when Venlil interests are involved," I hissed. "Noah wouldn't say anything that wasn't meant for UN ears, though; he's honorable."

A dark emotion flickered in Veln's pupils, and he hesitated. "I must ask, how in the stars did you keep the humans at bay, Tarva? Insight would be…accepted from Noah, at this point. They have… ways of being persuasive, by coercing people to do what they want. Trapping you with your own words, finding every loophole and technicality in the law. Is that why you went along with everything they said? Was I wrong about your motives?"

"That doesn't sound anything like the Terrans."

"Oh, that sounds everything like us, love," Noah growled, a low chuckle rumbling in his throat. "Our diplomats are quite skilled at *protecting* our interests."

"I understand what you're capable of, and what you…can do when threatened. But contrary to what Veln thinks, we disagreed on plenty. I never felt pressured to do anything I didn't want to."

"Because you care about us, and we care about you. Everyone at the UN knew you had humanity's back, so we had yours. We knew you wanted what was best for us, for Venlil, and for the entire galaxy; that was the one issue we had to agree on. It's really that simple. Veln over there wants to play hardball and trade favors, so he's asking for an entirely different relationship between us."

The governor narrowed his eyes. "I'm trying *not* to ice humanity out. Venlil are my top priority, but I don't mean any active harm to you!"

"If you watch out for the Venlil first, then the UN will elevate human interests above yours. Tarva considered us as much as Venlil, just as we considered you on the same level as us. It's up to you what relationship you want with Earth, Veln, but the way you're operating now won't merit true brotherhood. We are fiercely loyal, but we also give what we get. I think you know that's fair."

"What I know is that I want us to be independent, and I don't want anything dictated to us from outside our borders! It's not personal, it's just business."

I stood from my chair, grabbing Noah's hand. "It was always personal to me *and* them. Humans are sweet, but they're not pushovers. What you told them was you didn't want your talks to

be personal, so they've taken emotion out of their decisions. It *is* just business now: I don't see the issue?"

"The problem is their tactics are downright predatory, Tarva! They're ruthless and manipulative!"

"Then you're perfect for each other. And Veln, don't ask my advice unless you want to know how to start treating the Terrans as friends again. Like I said, their welfare is personal to me. Let's go, Noah."

My human was trying not to laugh at the outraged look on the governor's face; I suppose it could be viewed as audacity, that I'd spoken to Veln in that manner, but ousting me as ambassador would sour his political points. There was some curiosity in my mind about what humanity had done that the shifty Venlil found predatory. Still, it was enough to know that the United Nations was well-equipped to handle his self-centered schemes. I had noticed some major modifications on the visor law released to the public. My mind also harkened back to how Elias Meier had warned me about certain elements of his own government being "snakes in the grass", which Noah agreed with.

Governor Veln invited out a side of humanity they'd been keeping away from us. With legislation being targeted at their species, it's self-defense.

Noah allowed himself to smirk, once we reached our vehicle. "It was funny, but I'd advise not antagonizing Veln going forward. You're not going to be able to get any favors from him, if you make an enemy of him."

"You haven't exactly welcomed Veln with open arms, and you made sure he knew you can't stand him," I protested.

"I was never that forthright, Tarva. You basically called him predatory; I'm pretty sure that's the worst insult in your culture."

"Only after Veln used it against humanity. That Venlil should not think himself above you."

"I know, but I know how important it is to you to have breathing room with the Sapient Coalition. You don't want Veln to put you on a short leash—uh, forgive the predatory metaphor."

I flicked my ears in acknowledgement, digesting his point. Governor Veln had been willing to take some of my ideas under advisement, and he'd thrown his full support behind certain initiatives that mattered to me. The gene edit reversal and the Skalga referendum

were genuine positives that'd sprouted from his rule, while there was little to gain from turning my successor into an enemy. Noah watched with curious eyes as I pulled out my holopad, eager to see our voting process in action. I completed a double retinal scan, authenticated my conscious decision to vote through a code sent to my email, and scanned my ID card in front of the camera. The two options—Skalga and Other/Stay the Same—showed as buttons in large font.

I tapped Skalga, clicked a checkbox to confirm my choice, and submitted the ballot after pressing "Yes" when asked if I intended to pass along the results. Noah smiled as I snuggled up to him, before prying the holopad from my grasp. The predator searched up the exit polls, and his teeth flashed vibrantly as he turned the screen around to face me. Overwhelming public sentiment was in favor of retaking our ancestral name, with over 75% of those surveyed being "Skalga" supporters. Veln's attempts to dissuade the populace from bringing back the name the Federation stole from us failed. Though it wasn't a certain guarantee, it gave me the assurance that one of my initiatives had been taken to heart.

Our child is going to grow up on Skalga, able to run, jump, and smell. They'll be free of the instincts that have held us back too, if I have my way.

Noah's eyes fluttered over to me. "What do you say, before the SC meeting next week, we finally take that vacation to Earth? We haven't been able to go through with it for so long."

"I'd love to see where you grew up. After all, I want to make sure our child is familiar with Earth; we'll be spending plenty of time on human soil, as a family," I purred.

"You're really excited about that…step, aren't you? I've been thinking about it too. Settling down and having kids just wasn't ever in the cards for me. Exploring the universe was my calling, and that ruled out what might've been. The fact that we found extraterrestrials: it was like reaching the finish line of a race I thought I just started! It was the culmination of my dreams."

"If you're not excited about the idea of children, Noah, you don't have to pretend for me. It's okay. Your feelings are important too, and I don't want you to be unhappy in silence out of kindness."

"That's not what I'm trying to say. I'm just explaining that it's the

first time I thought about this, and I have no idea what to do raising a kid—a kid from a different species, no less. You, meanwhile, have experience with parenting and have ideas about how you want to raise the little fella; I'm not sure I can contribute or be as prepared for it as you. It's a huge responsibility, and the more I think about it, the more I know it."

"You're overwhelmed by the prospect."

"Well, yeah. I had an amazing dad, and I want to be just like him. I'm not worried that I have the wrong temperament or anything, but I don't want to undersell the work and commitment it'll take from us both. The fact that it'll be a massive undertaking as is…it's why I'm worried to suggest the idea I can't get out of my head."

"Breathe. We're going to figure out what's best for us both, and it'll be okay. What's your idea?"

"It might be too much to ask. I don't want to spoil your vision."

"Noah, I sprung on you that I'm getting experimental gene mods and looking to have a kid with zero warning. I think we've already crossed 'too much to ask.'"

The human's hands were trembling from nerves, and I gently coiled my tail around his wrist to calm him down. Our conversation back at the Sapient Coalition meeting had been harrowing from my side, so if Noah was addressing a topic of that magnitude for our personal lives, I could understand his apprehension. He was worried about putting our relationship on the rocks or scaring me off. I gently cupped his chin with my paw, giving him my best look of affection. Whatever change he felt compelled to suggest to our plans, I was willing to listen. Both of us were from different cultures and lives, so we could handle opinion schisms in a mature way.

Maybe Noah's not ready for the responsibility quite yet; he sounds stressed. We're not getting younger, but I could wait a few years if it'll make it more palatable for him to ease into. I want to do this together.

The astronaut drew a shaky breath. "Obviously, I'm not capable of giving birth, but…what if we adopted a human child?"

"Oh." My voice came out flat, as I tried to keep my emotions from spilling over. The thought of splitting up with Noah cut me like a knife, but a difference in interests that severe would be difficult to overcome. "I…understand if raising a Venlil is not right for you, but

the entire reason I wanted this was about having a child that can live the life I'll never have. I can't give that up, even for you."

"No! I'm not saying not to have the Venlil child, at all; I'm sorry for being unclear. I'm talking about raising a human child, *alongside* our little fluffball—raising them together. It's an added responsibility, I know, but I found the idea really…beautiful. A family that bridges the species gap."

It was my turn to be taken off-guard by Noah's suggestion toward our plans, though I didn't feel averse to the idea. I could imagine a little primate and a tiny Venlil running around in the park, laughing as one big family. Of course, I had no idea what was needed to raise a human, but I supposed that put me in the same boat as my partner; he was clueless what went into rearing one of my species' younglings. Having helpless sapients that were dependent on us to survive would mean we could learn about the other's kind at a fundamental level. Calling a predator my own child, caring and loving them just as my astronaut would love a Venlil, felt right. It was a daunting challenge for us both, yet I couldn't agree with the heartwarming idea fast enough.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, Noah," I replied. "Raising a human and a Venlil alongside each other, as siblings? I'll love our little Earthborn…I don't think I can call them a 'goober.' Can you suggest an adorable nickname?"

The Terran's pearly fangs showed with a radiant smile. "You could call them a goober. But why go for that when you can say, 'Our little *viciouspredator*?'"

"Ah, yes. Humanity, the vicious species whose first contact with the Zurulians…was the visiting ambassador curling up on a human diplomat's shoe."

"A human diplomat's *vicious* shoe."

"How can a shoe be vicious?"

"I'm sure the Federation would drum up some evil intentions we have with our foot coverings. Obviously, we use it to harden our feet to kick prey animals, like this." Noah lightly batted his shoe against my ankle, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Wait, I actually heard a story back at the embassy about someone throwing a shoe at a receptionist to distract security at a UN base. I don't know how

true that was."

"You could've stopped with the first part, but you just have to correct your words, don't you?"

"Accuracy is important. Science doesn't mess around with truth, my love. I wouldn't want anyone to say I omit unflattering aspects of the truth; I value my integrity."

"I value your integrity, and everything else about you, Noah Williams. You're the person who completes me, who gets me, and makes me feel like I am free to be happy again. I'm so glad the universe crossed our paths; I love you with all my heart."

The human's binocular eyes fixed on me with intense focus. "I love you too. Now, forever, and always. I'll love you to the heat death of the universe."

I rested my head against the predator's sturdy chest, exhaling with contentment. All I'd hoped for in recent months was a peaceful future between us and humanity. While I couldn't work as fervently toward that on the political stage, events in my personal life could align toward that sincere goal. My passion could also be devoted to returning the Venlil to our roots, and finding out what we were without the Federation. The referendum looked like a lock to return our name to Skalga, which meant the public was on the same page. Maybe after Noah and I paved the way for a post-gene reversal life, others would follow.

For the first time since my daughter's death, I felt that the best days of my personal life were ahead. Humanity's arrival was what gave me the chance to have a family again, freeing me from my ignorance and opening new doors into the future. I was grateful to have a partner who'd invested himself in my dreams, and morphed them into a joint effort that could give us a unique, wonderful opportunity. There was no telling what came next for us, but I was excited to see where the journey would lead.

Chapter 166

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

After my wishing for the Kolshians to face steep retribution for everything they'd done to Leirn, it turned out there was no need to prompt humanity to begin bombing. The Duerten Shield had been eager to obliterate anything housing life on Caato's surface. Watching the settlements vanish beneath a fiery glow, visible from space, did nothing to temper my rage. It didn't give me back the twenty years of my existence spent in a neurochemical haze, because I had *predator disease.* The Terrans seemed no more pleased than I was, and Sovlin's face showed a mixture of horror and concern.

Chewing on his reaction for a few seconds, I believed the old Gojid was worried about how the humans would respond to the Duerten's bombing endeavor. Tyler had spelled out the UN's intentions to end the cycle of violence, and not to become like other murderous factions in our neck of galaxy. I respected the Terrans enough to heed their direction; without the Earthlings' arrival, Leirn would still be overrun by Federation colonizers today. In my heart, I felt that the Kolshians needed to pay for the millions—*billions* of lives—they genocided through their tenure. Yet a coldness gripped me as I realized how *easy* it was to kill an entire populace.

This is what it means to wipe the Feds out once and for all, the reality I'd wished I could bring about. When Tyler said I think life means something, he wasn't wrong. This feels no better than watching all the things they did to us.

The Duerten ships veered away from the surface, knowing the life-facilitating habitats weren't able to withstand a dose of antimatter. As if they'd never gone astray, the birds rejoined Terran and Sapient Coalition forces in cleaning up the last Kolshians in the systems. I forwarded a final target for us to pick off in a fog, still reeling from the suddenness of the bombing. My concerns regarding the Duerten had been about how effective they'd be in the thick of combat, but now, I was worried about how much they'd lash out due to their "cornered animal" mentality. It wasn't out of the question that they'd turn their guns on us within their rage—not dissimilar to

how years of bottled anger led me to behave in explosive fashion at times.

The humans needed to handle the situation delicately. I wasn't sure how the primates might go about getting us and the Duerten on the same page. As the last active foes by Caato were picked off, the Terrans decided it was an appropriate time to break our silence. I could see a brief discussion between our officers, as the rest of the crew moved ahead with battle plans as though nothing was wrong. Navigations pulled us closer to the herd-like cluster of Shield and Coalition vessels, and synced us with their vector toward Aafa itself: the prize of the system.

Captain Monahan stewed by her station, scowling at the viewport. "Hail the Duerten Shield, yesterday! They're *not* going to launch an orbital raid over Aafa—especially not with our boots on the ground!"

"If I may, sir," I began, swiveling my ears toward Tyler, "the Sapient Coalition doesn't seem to have any objections over what the Duerten did to Caato. Your allies…won't challenge you, but they think that bombing was justified."

The blond human pursed his lips. "We know they're angry about their entire lives and societies being a lie. I know that you're angry about them stomping out the Yotul spirit for decades. But *those people* had nothing to do with that, and that's a damn straight fact."

"I know. It kind of…hit me, that everyone down there was just dead, in an instant. Even if the Kolshians deserve it, it's terrifying to be the arbiters of which civilizations live and which ones die. Humans don't want to set the precedent of who you chose not to save."

"When you stop believing your enemies are people, that opens the door to monstrous acts," Carlos agreed. "Humanity is making a conscious choice to care about all life, even when it feels impossible to do so."

Samantha snorted. "*All life*. I don't see how we ever fix this authoritarian clusterfuck. Besides, I have as much sympathy for Caato as they had for Melbourne, which is zero. But since we saved their asses, the Duerten have no right to show up, circumvent our wishes, and give us the runaround."

“Well, they did,” Sovlin grumbled. “Ons—the atavist is right. Your allies agree with them, not you, and infighting would fuck us over. Tread carefully with that rebuke.”

Tyler heaved a weary sigh. “Not my department. My job is to make sure whatever goes down, we keep an eye on it. We’ll see what the captain says and provide support accordingly.”

Monahan’s hail had gone unanswered for several minutes, a sign that the Duerten weren’t eager to give humanity an account for their actions. I tried not to fixate on the outstanding call. Even if tensions erupted within our own ranks, it would still be vital for me to have a full picture of what was happening throughout the system. My gaze filtered down to the sensors screen, where I could gauge the success of our other group; Yotul Technocracy ships and UN drones had kept pace with Ilthiss, gunning into the asteroid belt. The shadow fleet had taken up positions there to utilize terrain to their advantage, and it seemed our Arxur allies had reenacted their reckless strategy from the gas giant.

The Chief Hunter sacrificed thousands of his vessels *again* on a headlong charge; the particle beam-armed ships accompanying him were the ones who had the Commonwealth’s number. The Arxur reinforcements were still afloat with about fifteen thousand ships, while the Technocracy and UN top artillery were reigning supreme in this conflict. My team engaging the Kolshians’ second-rate ships here allowed our heavy hitters to demolish their secret arsenal without distractions. When our forces joined up to storm Aafa, we’d make it a grueling challenge for the Federation to defend their core world. The enemy hadn’t whittled us down along the way as much as they hoped.

The only thing that could fuck this up is if we get into it with the Duerten, right before the final stage. We need unity, so I hope Monahan will be pragmatic. That’s assuming the Shield answer?

After several minutes of waiting, the same Duerten commander from earlier appeared. “What is it you want, human? You said we can choose our role, and we chose what we came here for. Do we have a problem?”

“Easy. I wished to coordinate our plans for taking Aafa, without using an intermediary. We’re *not enemies,* so we need to be on the same page,” Monahan said.

“For a predator, you show zero appreciation for a display of violence. Your SC friends tell me we’re not on the same page, at all. And also, you let us take charge at Caato, just to bump us when we get to the main event? Nice try.”

“Duerten commander, this isn’t a contest. This is about the fate of both of our people, and for that matter, all intelligent life in a thousand-light year radius. I heard what you said about being angry, and coming here to dish out violence. I assure you that humanity understands, appreciates, and empathizes with your feelings. We know you’re hurting, but I know we both agree that we *have* to win this battle. Us being divided or miscommunicating could spell disaster for our chances.”

“We’re not divided, unless you try to stop us from finishing the job! If you truly grasped how we feel about the billions of our own lying dead, there would be nothing to talk about. Don’t pretend you aren’t about to plead for us not to bomb those soulless bastards.”

“I’m pleading for you to stay your explosives long enough for us to have a mutual discussion on what to do with Aafa. And most importantly, for humanity to head to the surface and gather information to ensure the Kolshians become a non-factor in the galaxy. Please, listen to my next words: we know very little about the shadow caste. We want to know their motives for starting this entire cycle of hatred, so we can have closure for Earth. If you’re truly grateful for our help in saving Kalqua, you’ll let us have that.”

The Duerten’s beak parted in confusion. “You’d go to all the trouble of landing, risking human lives, and merely delaying what we plan to do…for information on *why* they did it?”

“It’s beyond the why. The practical reason is one I think you’ll agree with. Our lack of information on the shadow caste means we have no idea where they hid. It could be on another planet far-off, perhaps even in a system belonging to you or one of your allies. It could be under the very oceans of Aafa, like the Archives were; if we don’t find out the truth, those bombs could miss the people who are undeniably responsible for what was done to you. We succeed by doing this by the book, and without letting our emotions cloud our judgment. Trust us to be *predators,* and hunt every Kolshian conspirator down.”

“You will share your findings with us, and not omit anything for

your own purposes?"

"We are not the ones who hide our true intentions. I see no reason we can't work in harmony, to dig up any other dirty secrets the Kolshians might have that will threaten us all. What do you say?"

The gray avian was silent for long, brooding seconds. "Assuming you can get unequivocal command of Aafa, I'll have my fleet hold their fire. If things go astray or it looks like we might be losing the fight, we're glassing as many cities on that blighted rock as we can."

"Then let's make sure we win," Monahan declared. "Take care of yourself, Commander. I…I hope this is the start of better relations between our species. And I hope that you can find peace, someday."

"Hmph. I hope that you find the closure you're looking for, human. Good luck."

The Duerten commander vanished from the screen, and our captain's face lit up with visible relief. Persuading the Shield to let us land bought us some time, without worrying about the first bombs landing as our soldiers touched down. On a personal level, it allowed Tyler and I to accomplish the mission that brought us away from our easy assignments in the first place—finding out what the Kolshians had done to Slanek. Perhaps that mystery would overlap with the broad answers the United Nations was seeking out. Even when I felt certain that Aafa's glassing was the optimal outcome, I'd wanted to help my best friend first.

With a temporary solution to our internal disagreements, that eliminated one hurdle to taking the Kolshian homeworld. I tried to wipe what happened on Caato from my mind, and focus on what was ahead of us. The entirety of the Terrans' efforts since first contact led to this moment. The Duerten Shield and Sapient Coalition fanned out, while we maneuvered to the heart of the formation; meanwhile, Yotul Technocracy, Terran drones, and Arxur allies took up angles from opposite headings. Our collection of ships was forming a net that encircled Aafa, merging into a cohesive unit that'd swallow the planet's defenses from all sides.

I pivoted our viewport onto the luscious world, a series of faint violets and greens dotting the continents from native vegetation. City lights were more prolific on Aafa's form than the electric glimmers on Caato, while the oceans were unbroken swaths of blue. I couldn't rule out the possibility that the shadow fleet planted its

cities beneath the waves, where no one would ever look. The Kolshians' ectolan ancestors had aquatic origins, and as the Thafki proved, species who were drawn to water never truly lost that itch. Whatever secrets were hiding down there, we needed to steamroll the hundreds of thousands of Commonwealth ships above it to find them. Now was not the time for any missteps.

Tyler cleared his throat. "You see the planetary defenses on the lunar satellite? Those are gonna prevent us from getting close enough to Aafa for a landing or an airdrop, and they're gonna be a massive problem for our ships. It'll be a bloodbath to get a clean angle to take them all out from above, 'cause they got a fuck ton of outposts."

"We understand from the crew briefing," I replied. "Secretary-General Zhao's drawn comparisons to Normandy, an amphibious assault where, according to my research, one coalition stormed a desired target's beaches to take them over. We want to overrun the Kolshian planetary defenses and claim them for ourselves."

"Yes, precisely. If we can turn their own powerful lasers and ground-based artillery on the shadow fleet, it'll give us a massive boost. As an officer of this ship, I have no intention of volunteering for this mission; infantry and security personnel have been assigned from our vessel, and many others. But if anyone does feel their skillset fits a job like this, I'm giving you the opportunity to join the landing party in the hangar bay."

"Fuck no…sir. I'm staying with you."

"Good. After the boarding incident, you're sticking with me whether you want to or not. That prompt was mainly directed at Harris and Romero."

Samantha narrowed her eyes. "What, because we're foot soldiers who got stuck being Baldy's watchdogs?"

"Pretty sure that's why Officer Cardona asked us. We stormed the Archives and that Arxur cattle ship, and we're the most qualified ones at this station," Carlos sighed.

"Qualified ones to pad the cannon fodder. Also able to shoot a gun and clear a building, unlike the Feddies. You know what, fuck it, I'm in. Might be the only place the damn UN lets me shoot at those Kolshian dickwads."

“You’re truly eloquent, Sam. A way with words.”

“I’m going to get the job done. I don’t hear you volunteering to leave this cozy ship.”

“I’m in if you are, you absolute psycho. Let’s gear up and head to the hangar—”

Sovlin swatted Carlos with the blunt side of his claws. “Wait for me. None of you even asked me, after the three of us have been through *several* gunfights together.”

“Whoa, I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Tyler protested. “Are you… sure? It involves a spacedrop: you know, jumping out of this ship. Also a jump where you’ll be far back enough to need the use of jet thrusters ’til you’re within lunar gravity range.”

“What?! You want to pull the crazy shit you did on the cradle, but from *space?*”

“And while dropping military rovers too. I’m glad you’re getting the picture—”

“So let’s skip to the part where Baldy wimps out and says a tearful goodbye,” Samantha interjected.

“Fuck you! I don’t like the idea *at all*, but if you can do it, so can I.” The Gojid’s remaining spines bristled, tipping off his fear. “Who flew the shuttle down to Sillis, pushing it harrowingly close to its breaking point?”

“Yeah, but you also freaked out when the aerosub started sinking on Talsk.”

“That was water. I don’t know if you know this, Sam, but that’s different from land. There’s no water on the stupid hunk of rock there. As long as you’re not crashing *this* moon into a planet, we’re good.”

Tyler hesitated. “You are qualified infantry, but aliens just don’t have the training for orbital drops. However, if you want to hurl yourself into the line of fire, I won’t stand in your way. Tag along with Harris and Romero if you’re sure.”

“Sure as can be. They’re not getting rid of me.”

“Pfft, great. Still stuck babysitting the war criminal with spikes that could poke my eyes out,” Sam lamented, though I caught the teasing lilt in her voice.

“That’s right, my remaining spikes *could* poke your ugly-ass eyes out, so you better be nicer! Let’s move.”

The trio vacated the bridge, leaving Tyler and I to man the sensors station during the crucial battle. When I proved myself more than capable of supplying tactical insight in Sovlin’s absence, it would be difficult for the Gojid to use racist perjoratives toward my capabilities. I centered the viewport on the Kolshian and Dominion ships between us and the lunar satellite, while also setting my filters to watch for any planetary defense lasers vectoring toward us. Our goal was to get the infantry that would be storming the enemy fortifications as close to the target as possible. It was also preferable that they didn’t deploy right in the middle of a plasma beam contest.

I ran a hasty analysis on the makeup of the first ships we’d be facing; pinpointing enemy weaknesses required knowledge of what we were up against. The shadow fleet had staked a massive claim within Aafa’s bounds, while the Dominion also had camped eye-popping numbers by the target. It was a little surprising that the Arxur captains had been dissuaded from dropping a few bombs on the Kolshians, with their cruelty-centric culture. Furthermore, of the hundreds of thousands of craft here for the final stand, very few were manned Commonwealth vessels. Most of the public military appeared to have been *sacrificed* along the route.

“Among the Aafa-based ships marked as ‘hostiles’, very few appeared to be manned, sir,” I informed Tyler. “I will just bring your attention to the contacts designated civilian: standard evac transports. Out ahead of the front lines, and the only manned ships that I can see.”

The human nodded. “How many souls aboard?”

“Hundreds. No sign of weapons on board or anything anomalous. They *are* flying straight toward us, but we’re also blocking all the ways out of the system. Assuming you don’t want them blown up, you might want to direct the Duerten away from their flight path.”

“Understood. I do wonder why they didn’t evacuate civilians sooner. They’ve known we’re coming for weeks. Sure, they’re arrogant, but there had to have been some civvies who wanted to get out when they heard the *flesh-eating predators* were coming.”

I tilted my head in befuddlement. “Um, I do think some of the

populace would've wanted to leave with advance warning. The only thing I can come up with is that they didn't tell them ahead of time?"

"That…is a reason. The squids sure do like keeping their control, and not giving people the option to leave…could be part arrogance and part tyranny. I dunno, but we ain't gonna shoot evac shuttles."

"The Duerten might want to. It was done to their civilians, trying to leave Kalqua. They only agreed to spare Aafa so humanity could eradicate the shadow caste."

"I heard you, Onso. Plus, I get that those fuckers might've sent the evac ships up now, so we have to fight around the civvies to get to the military targets. I'll notify the captain, and we'll get our SC pals to quietly push the Shield as far away from those transports as possible."

"Okay. I'll keep an eye on their path, so weapons knows where they are."

The blond officer strode off to confer with Captain Monahan, while I mulled over the circumstances on the battlefield. Within the hour, we'd be squaring off for our first engagement near Aafa; the civilian ships were an unwelcome variable, and the Terrans were too honorable to take them out of the equation. It was important to determine why the evac shuttles had been held back until now, before they complicated a testing battle even further. The humans hadn't expected the Kolshians to fight clean, so it was possible the hostiles meant to sacrifice their own non-combatants or use them as living shields.

Solidifying our understanding of Aafa's motives for this launch timing could be necessary to stave off any dirty tricks they had in mind. I hoped humanity wouldn't be forced to make the decision between innocents and victory, but I knew they were willing to do whatever it took to end the war.

Chapter 167

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

Our fleet crested toward our waiting enemies, with the greatest tools and allies mankind had been able to assemble. As impressive as Earth's wartime innovations had been, it was their relentless pursuit of friends that we'd reaped the most rewards from so far; having others to back us up made it possible to challenge a multitude of foes. The road to reach Aafa's orbit hadn't been pretty, but war never was so beautiful or clean. The Terrans hadn't escaped entirely free from compromising their beliefs, or sacrificing lives they wished they didn't have to. Assuming we gained orbital control, I wasn't sure what we'd do about the Duerten's determination to glass this world.

My grim realization was that humanity might have to bend their values again, with the Kolshians sending up civilian ships amid the battle. The evacuation shuttles hadn't lowered their thrusters, despite the oncoming onslaught. The United Nations hadn't fired on the transports, though we were in range to take the first ones out; I could see weapons growing antsy the nearer they got. The Terran allied fleet ceded a slight opening, altering our path enough to drift out of their way. With thousands of weaponless refugee vehicles coasting ahead, it was difficult to steer clear of all of them. I eyed the sensor readout, and noticed them sending power to directional thrusters.

The evac shuttles might be trying to sidestep us…but if they're afraid enough of Terrans to leave, why would they trust them not to fire?

My head snapped toward Tyler. "Get weapons to fire on those shuttles! They're hostiles!"

"Hang on. What evidence do you have for that, Onso?" the human asked, in a wary voice. "I know you think they deserve to be wiped out, but—"

"The evidence is they're not acting afraid of you. *None* of them are flinching! My gut instinct says they're up to no good."

"The Kolshians have a better understanding of what's the truth about us. They might know our code of ethics against shooting

civilians."

"The shadow caste knows, but the average citizen doesn't. That means the secret fleet must be piloting those shuttles! It's the only thing that explains their behavior."

"Sensors would know if they're hiding weapons, so that…no. My God."

Captain Monahan frowned, having overheard our exchange. "That's a bold *assumption,* but it has the ring of truth to it. Weapons, patch us in with our allies. Advise them to hold their fire, but shoot any transports that draw too close."

As comms fired off a hasty communique and I passed along the nearest shuttle for weapons to target, the speediest Kolshian transport swerved at a UN drone. The automated vessel was programmed not to shoot at civilian targets without authorization or clear hostile activity. When the evac ship rammed into our unpiloted vehicle full speed, it smoked through its hull; both spacecraft were shattered in the collision. Hundreds of life signatures from within the shuttle vanished in an instant, strewn to cosmic dust. On the thousands of ships carrying refugees, similar passenger counts showed on my readout. Given the lack of panicked movement within the interiors, I assumed they had no idea what their fate was going to be.

The civilian vessels turned on the first Terran ships they could encounter, with several hundred crashing before we'd reacted to the unthinkable. I could feel a knot of horror in my stomach, as I realized how little the Commonwealth thought of the lives of their own people. While humanity chose to care about all life in the galaxy, the Kolshians cared for *none*. Those civilians had been loaded onto the shuttles without a clue to their fate, with the promise of escaping the system. The shadow fleet knew we wouldn't shoot a genuine transport down, and conned hundreds of thousands of their citizens into climbing aboard to make it believable.

They waited to start evacuations until the last minute, because they intended to use innocent lives as a weapon. How will they ever explain this to their people? How do military commanders, at least the ones from the public fleet, have no gripe with this strategy?

Captain Monahan's teeth were bared with contempt. "Shoot down

every one of those transports. And sensors, from now on, don't mark any Kolshian ships as noncombatants."

"Understood, ma'am." I applied filters to label anything with a Kolshian warp signature as hostile; if there were any innocents, their government's deranged actions had revoked their right to protection. "The transports are shown as hostiles now. I've left a new class indicator to reflect their unarmed status, so weapons can fully assess our priorities."

"Good work, Onso," Tyler grumbled, though his gaze was far-off, struggling to process such a senseless gambit of civilian lives. "You were right. After what they've done to entire planets, I guess this shouldn't surprise me."

"This time, it's not just them letting it happen, like they did with the Thafki, or the attacks on Nishtal and the cradle. This is intentionally and knowingly sending civilians to their deaths. How did they sell this to the people outside of the conspiracy?"

"If I know one thing about the Federation, it's that they love to blame predators for anything they have to do. Better dead than cattle…what's the sacrifice of a few thousand people, if it saves the herd? Yet *our* empathy is what's under a microscope. That's a bad fucking punchline, huh?"

"It's not a punchline if it's not the least bit funny."

"It ain't funny, but it sure is a joke. We coulda had hundreds of friends if the Federation didn't exist. I'd sure like to have seen what kinda shake we woulda gotten. Like *It's A Wonderful Life*, except that it's a good thing they weren't around."

"Once again, I don't understand a word you're saying."

"That's how I feel with you and your science words. Forget my movie references, and put that big brain of yours to work. We gotta get Baldy and company within range of the moon."

"I'm working on it. We're needing to pass through the shadow fleet wall ahead…slated to make contact in a few minutes. After we clear out the civilian transports."

The human nodded. "Eyes on the Dominion's main activities?"

"They're on the offensive. Gunning for the Shield and the SC when they can, since they get off on hunting prey, but I don't think that's

our primary concern."

"It's not. Keep at it, buddy."

The Terran warships sliced through the remaining transports like putty. The shuttles' lack of shields or armor allowed them to be downed with relative ease. The Kolshians' ghastly trick had taken out a few hundred ships before the first shots rang out, but I knew our true casualties would surface once we engaged the enormous armada. I angled the viewport toward the moon where the planetary defenses sat, which was doling out carnage with any lasers that landed. It was difficult to imagine Sovlin in a vac suit, traipsing around; the rovers dropping to the ground were the only way he'd keep up with the persistence predators' trek. Their mission could entail heavy resistance, so the more we could simplify the landing process, the better.

While our manned ships were pigeonholed into closing on the moon, in order to unload infantry, other contests were being waged across the planet's breadth. Flashes of orange and white, signifying explosions and plasma respectively, detonated above the world's entire circumference. Speedy UN drones on this side of Aafa were targeted by the planetary defenses from afar. Meanwhile, from the globe's opposite half, missiles blazed into space from the depths of the ocean. It lent credence to the theory that the Kolshians had constructions within abyssal waters. These warheads appeared to be nuclear-armed, and their ability to escape the atmosphere and find targeting *was* an impressive feat of engineering.

I'm sure they didn't stuff those missiles onto one side of the planet's oceans and not the other. I'll stay vigilant for anything at the atmospheric fringes on our side; we don't want to get blindsided by nukes.

The Terrans had a better capacity to thwart the ballistic missiles lobbed at singular ships, although such mighty munitions packed a forceful punch even if they were stopped short of the target. The Yotul Technocracy also possessed particle beams that could slice through a warhead's arming mechanisms. However, Chief Hunter Ilthiss' craft got walloped by the influx of nuclear weapons; it was clear the Dominion ships had been ordered to pay no mind to defense. What was fortunate was that the Sapient Coalition and Duerten Shield were kept on our side of the globe, or else they

might've fallen victim just like Ilthiss had. Our Dominion allies were reduced to a small remaining force, cutting off one source of manpower.

"Sir, I know I said it's not our primary concern, but I don't think we want our herbivorous allies to take a shellacking like Ilthiss," I remarked. "Can they handle Arxur fighting them one-on-one…or *two-*on-one?"

Tyler bobbed his shoulders. "I doubt it, but we can't worry about that until the planetary defenses are offline. Hopefully the grays aren't ready for prey to actually fight back. The Duerten are out for blood, so hopefully that compensates for their lack of tactics."

"I suppose they're lucky they're fighting Arxur, not shadow fleet ships. We're the ones who are pitted up against the biggest threat… and the sole path to the moon is *through them.*"

The human tapped a marked radius of space. "I input the region we need to get to for troop deployment, per the mission parameters. Worry about finding us the best route, and keeping us apprised of any threats. Might be a bumpy ride, y'know?"

"Understood. I also know we want to be as close as possible, so I'll look for anything that helps us gain ground."

Our warships were joined by some UN drone support, since our manned vessels were at a disadvantage against Kolshian automatons. The lasers on the moon amped up their firing speed, putting an exclusive focus on our newest and strongest craft; outdated crewed vehicles were neglected all together. The amount of power that could be funneled through the lunar installment was astounding. Similar to how humans moved their nuclear arsenal to Luna, the Commonwealth had stationed some of their high-yield explosives on the natural satellite; that kept them closer to the action in the event of a raid, rather than buried in the ocean. Our flight path wasn't dissimilar to Kalsim's en route to Earth. I wondered if the Kolshians had taken notes from that clash.

It didn't seem the shadow fleet had grasped our intentions, since they were regarding the UN drones as the greatest threat. Our highest concentrations of automatons found shield-breakers deposited in their midst, and were tag-teamed by ship weapons and planetary defenses. Manned Terran vessels were able to cruise forward with minimal fire trained on us; thousands of soldier-toting

friendlies sailed toward the arbitrary boundary where our troops could deploy. It was only as we neared the skirmish line that our foes rounded on us, and plasma began zipping our way. I could see debris littering the edges of the viewport, a telltale sign of why thousands of our drones had vanished from sensors.

If our finest vessels are getting mowed down by these planetary defenses, I see why we need to capture or eliminate the infrastructure. Imagine how the Duerten Shield would fare against weapons of this kind! This must be why the Kolshians thought Aafa was impenetrable.

Navigations yanked our ship to one side, turning our casual glide into a spiral to avoid plasma. Shields blinked out on my readout, with the shadow fleet having ample shield-busters in reserve to handle us. I pinpointed a Kolshian automaton for weapon targeting, but its algorithms were one step ahead of our hastily-deployed shot; the beam fell wide by a large margin. Charging ahead against superior craft wasn't ideal, yet the threshold we needed to reach sat behind these vessels. Our own drones had to break free from their predicament and give us an assist, or we were going to end up in multiple pieces. I could see several manned craft flanking us reduced to tattered husks.

I traced a vector toward a marginal opening in their ranks. "This is the best opening I can find, but it takes us within their direct line of fire. My suggested strategy would be to set up barriers and hunker down, except that time is of the essence."

"The Kolshians will close the gap as soon as we make a run for it, won't they?" Tyler sighed.

"Obviously. They don't know our true plans, but they don't want anyone getting in range of the planetary defenses. Hell, even if we get past them, we'll have lasers and nukes from that moon thrown in our face. Need to launch the troops and get out fast."

"Why haven't they used those nukes?"

"Probably going to wait to launch them, in the event we get past their line. They don't want the shadow fleet caught up in the blast radius. Layers of defense."

"So we need a distraction. We've got a few spacecraft carriers; time for 'em to open their bellies and pester the squids with some fighters. Back where it all began."

I twitched my ears. “It’s a start, but we need more. If we have any antimatter bombs left after the gas giant fight…I think it’s time to use them against singular ships. It’ll punch an opening and give us a moment to breakthrough.”

“We do got some leftover warheads. Don’t got any intention of dropping those on Aafa, ‘specially after Monahan’s little chat, so throwing ‘em in the Kolshians’ face sounds fantabulous to me. I’ll bring the captain in the loop.”

I locked in the optimal vector for our navigations, before offering a second set of targets that needed to be displaced. On the viewport, munitions whizzed past us; standard combat missiles were locked on Terran ships by the thousands. Weapons was working overtime to strike the explosives down before they reached us, though one rammed straight into our nose. Without shields, it blew off a large chunk of our underbelly, though thankfully, it was shy of the hangar where our troopers were congregated. We were fortunate the hull integrity held together, and that the fissures in our armor plating were not spreading throughout the vessel.

Non-critical hit. Might lessen the power we can route to the railgun, but it could be much worse. We don’t want to get hit by anything else lobbed our way.

Tyler gave me a nod as he returned from the captain’s station, signaling her approval of my plan; comms sent out the call for fighter support. It was rare to utilize such massive munitions in fleet confrontations, since their design was tailored to targeting sprawling regions from orbit. We prepared to divert all power to thrusters; there would be a single chance to make a break for it, assuming our plan worked. I watched as we bore down on the Kolshians, with some level of concern for our safety. Inertial dampeners were suffering the occasional lapse, pushed to the hardware’s limits by our erratic maneuvers. The disadvantage of having biological life onboard was that we couldn’t take severe evasion actions like drones without killing the occupants.

I could see the bubble of space nearing on sensors, but despite the strategic advantage, I wasn’t going to suggest we push deeper to give our friends a better launch point. It would already be perilous to get their jetpacks in range at all. Fighters slingshotted out into space from our behemoth carriers, who lurked at the back of the

pack. That was step one of the distraction, as nimble UN frames weaved up close and nipped at the Kolshians' heels. Our bombing classes were preparing the deployment of antimatter weapons, ready to forcefully vacate the enemy from this patch of space. Humanity was too stubborn to turn back; we were pushing through to the target destination, here and now.

Plasma clipped the already damaged part of our ship, as our jerky movements failed to skirt a close-range beam entirely. I moved closer to Tyler on instinct, drawing strength from having my buddy at my side. We'd always known that deploying to Aafa was a risk, but standing by him was worth sacrificing the idyllic future that beckoned to me on Leirn. If those antimatter bombs didn't get out of allied bays soon, we were going to be lit up like a sacrifice to Ralchi. Kinetics raked across the front of our ship, mauling us even further. Navigations was overloaded with new threats, desperately dipping down and throwing out interceptors. There was no time to get our bearings and counter the inbound munitions, as we felt the ship rattle from impact after impact.

"Hey, Tyler?" I hissed. "If this is the last thing I say, I've got three words picked out. Fuck the Federation."

The blond human ruffled my forehead fur, earning a hiss from me. "Damn straight, but I don't plan on dying none. We gotta rescue Slanek; promised Marcel. Onward and upward!"

My quizzical look intensified, as I questioned whether that exclamation was in reference to hot-air balloons. There were worse things to die thinking about than Terran flight devices, and the technical chain of events that led them to the natural development of starships. A lot of people would've sought something more meaningful to dwell on, but I want to go out fantasizing about what I loved. The red dots on the screen, indicating threats, faded into the background. I waited for the inevitable, even as the primates fought tooth and nail to press ahead.

Instead of getting bulldozed by two plasma beams, our warship managed to turn on its axis; we glided between two searing arcs that were meant to ensnare us. My optimism for our prospects lifted ever so slightly, as the antimatter bombs began to unload from across our fleet. Hostile drones balked with city-leveling munitions incoming, and tried to maneuver out of the way. Their plan was to

let each missile sail past, where it would be locked onto nothing and could be disabled at their leisure. However, another wave of human warheads chased them along their evacuation route, forcing them to widen the gap further. A third volley kept them back so we could pass unassailed, like wild beasts being fended off by a waving torch.

The antimatter did connect with a handful of enemy targets, mainly those who'd lost mobility earlier in the battle. Massive levels of energy were thrown out from the epicenter, and I had to hurriedly account for a plane of shrapnel which was generated in our path. The edge of the launch point was a few seconds out, so Sovlin, Carlos, and Sam could leap to the moon if we got a little further. UN fighters and drones mobilized in a circle around us, standing between the manned vessels and the shadow fleet. They were taking the brunt of the barrage, buying precious seconds, which must've tipped off the Kolshians to our importance.

However, it was too late for the shadow fleet to stop us from executing our plans. The region where we were cleared to spacedrop troops flashed green, as the sensor dot for our warship poked its nose across the boundary. Without an instant's hesitation, the hangar bay was flung open, and human soldiers leapt from the safety of our vessel to get boots on the lunar ground.

Chapter 168

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

The humans had really done it.

The deranged predators strapped themselves into multi-layered spacesuits, and leapt straight into space. I wasn't sure what compelled my stout legs to follow their lead, but here I was, coasting alongside Carlos and Sam with no way back. The jet pack alongside my oxygen gave me a small push toward the lunar surface, with its flight computer having been programmed with my mass and height differential in mind. My claws wrapped around my rifle, which was tethered to my chest; the last thing I needed was for my weapon to float away. I wasn't fully convinced we'd survive this stunt. Assuming we did, a single bullet which made it through or around the suit's armor plates would expose us to the vacuum.

It was absolute lunacy, though it was made worse by the fact they'd slingshotted military rovers—of massive size and with gigantic guns—toward the moon atop thruster stages. It didn't seem possible for it not to break apart when it struck the ground, without a true engine tacked onto it. That was our likeliest fate too; it seemed idyllic floating through space now, but hurtling toward the cratered, slate-colored surface would be *terrifying*. Did humans lack cognizance of falling or heights? Why had I agreed to go with them: just to prove myself to these should-be predator disease inmates?

The good news was a ship sniping lifeforms in the breadth of space was almost as difficult as nailing a nanodrone; we were microbes to a shadow fleet weapons station. That rendered the odds of us getting cooked by plasma low, though not zero. I cast a glimpse back at our warship, in time to see it making a hurried retreat from the planetary defenses. UN drones were fighting the Kolshians tooth and claw, but the enemies were easily sealing the temporary gap formed by our bombs. There was no telling whether our friends would survive the battle that raged overhead, as we careened toward the satellite's pull. The planetary defenses had to be disabled, if we wanted the rest of the crew to have a fighting chance.

“Sam, are you sure this is safe?” I asked over the comms link.

The human’s irate expression was something I could imagine beneath her helmet. “Aw. Need a diaper change, Sovlin?”

“Fuck you. I’d like a realistic idea of our chances.”

“Well, even if you pass out like a scaredy-cat, the pack’s automated. It calculated the best route with its fuel reserves. We did a small-scale test of the tech on Luna, but it’s pretty new. Even if it does orient us in the right direction on an alien world, when our measurements rely on *trustworthy-as-fuck* Fed science, it’s up to you to land on your feet and haul ass.”

Carlos patched into our helmet link. “Thankfully, you’ll only have to hoof it to the nearest rover. If the trajectory is on point, our ride will be a few hundred feet away. From there, we got some big guns, and a little more padding between us and a stray bullet.”

“You have armed ground vehicles specifically for moons?”

“And for harsh terrain planets like Caato or Mars. UN’s had these bad boys out on Mars, mostly for search-and-rescue, but also in case any security action was needed. Dunno why they don’t use tank treads; hm, you *could* ask Onso, if you wanted to know.”

“Bah, I bet that primitive read all the answers in a book somewhere. I could do that too.”

Sam snorted. “Then why don’t you?”

“I’m busy. Currently dropping onto a moon with just a jet pack, for example. But I’m not establishing contact with that joke of an engineer until we need to patch ourselves back into the ship; all they need to know is when the planetary defenses are under our control, and we need a ride out.”

“UN Command will be in touch with our ground leaders the whole way through. We only need to phone home once we want off this barren rock.”

“How will the fleet know if we fail?”

“The installation will blow up,” Carlos answered in a voice that had too much levity. “Giant fireball, base gone. Quite visible.”

I flailed within my spacesuit. “What?!”

“Yep. I thought you listened in the briefing? Each installation across

the lunar surface, including the one we're raiding, has a self-destruct function so that it doesn't fall out of their control. However, it requires authorization keys from two individuals. They'll want the planetary defenses in the space fight as long as possible, so they'll be standing by the receptacle until their base is about to fall."

"The part I did listen to was *the part where we still plan to storm their safe house.* Do you warmonger apes *like* complexes blowing up in your face?"

"We prefer not getting immolated in giant explosions. Thanks for asking," Sam chirped.

The lunar surface was enhancing in detail, and I could feel gravity playing a hand in my acceleration. The uptick in apparent velocity caused my stomach to churn, which made me desperate for the humans to keep talking as a distraction. My claws wanted to uncurl from the gun; instinctive panic told me I was about to die. The predators crossed their arms in front of their chests as they hurtled toward solid ground. Unfortunately, the more I heard about this plan, the less comforting I found their growling voices. The fact that they knew the base was prepped to detonate as soon as we got close suggested this was a suicide mission.

What if the humans are sacrificing us to get the planetary defenses destroyed, the way the Kolshians sent civilians to their deaths on those evac shuttles? How can clever predators like my guards not see this as a death sentence?

"I'm willing to die for what I've done, but I would've liked to have been told up front. I'd still do it so Earth can survive—for that debt I'll always owe you—but I don't love the idea of getting blown to bits!" I hissed.

Carlos' sigh was audible within my helmet. "As I *was* saying, the two authorized Kolshians will need to stand by to initiate the self-destruct. Makes them a sitting target. Snipers take out one of them, and make sure no one else grabs the key. Our job will be to clear the facility, and assume control of the command center."

"Hm. You left out the part of the job where we compete for the highest kill count of Kolshian asswipes," Samantha interjected. "Oh, and Carlos, Baldy's definitely thinking he shoulda stayed with Onso. The Yotul was the smart one, sitting in front of a bloody screen."

“I do hope that nothing happens to that taushana,” I remarked, mischievously checking whether the humans knew that word.

“That didn’t translate. What’s ‘taushana’ mean?”

“It’s a loving term of affection. Onso asked to be called that instead of primitive.”

“I don’t fucking trust you.”

“I’m being serious. If anything happens to me, tell him Sovlin was proud to work alongside such a bright-eyed taushana.”

“Hm. That *almost* sounds nice.”

“It is nice. I promise, taushana holds a special place in the Yotul language, especially in Rinsa. Onso and you battle-bonded, so it’d mean a lot from you, Sam.”

“I’ll…consider it. I do respect that wiseass firecracker. He’s alright for—”

The rest of Samantha’s slanted compliment eluded my comprehension. My focus was ripped back to my trajectory, once retro thrusters kicked in to slow my fall. With conversation failing to distract me, I noticed *why* boost power was kicking in. We were close enough to the ground that it was time to tap the brakes; my personal propulsion warred with gravity, yet gravity seemed to be winning. What spikes I had struggled against their bindings underneath the back of my suit. This free-falling sensation wasn’t anything that Gojids evolved to withstand, and my head was spinning from the rapidity of it all. Fear throttled my heart without any reprieve, threatening to strip me of my faculties.

The lunar surface expanded within my periphery, like it was being magnified across a viewport. Craters that looked like tiny divots from afar were becoming gaping basins; a few miles from our landing site, the planetary defense complex was taking on a three-dimensional appearance at last. My brain weighed the cumulative stimuli, and proclaimed my death was imminent. I couldn’t imagine how the Terran troopers who airdropped onto the cradle felt, on a planet with full gravity that well exceeded this moon’s attraction. Predators were built differently from us, but humans were a fearless breed even among hunters. I was certain the Arxur wouldn’t tackle such daunting heights.

Does that make me braver than the grays? That thought almost gives me

the willpower to keep my wits; besides, it's not like I can undo the fact I jumped out of a spaceship with suicidal primates at this point.

"Fuck!" I screamed into the comms. "Where is the fabric overhang you had on the cradle? Did you crazy, *insufferable* predators forget that?!"

Carlos' chuckle sounded too carefree. "Oh, this is better than normal skydiving! So gentle and tranquil—I'd do this for fun. The adrenaline, Sovlin. Don't you feel alive?"

"I *feel* like I want to know where the gliding tarp is! We need to slow the fuck down!"

"Well, a parachute would be useless. There's no air in space for it to catch on."

"Duh. You don't have to be Onso to understand basic facts," Sam jabbed.

I gulped down the oxygen circulating within my suit, leaving myself a mental reminder to purposefully have Sam run into my spines if I ever had the option again. Those mind-warped humans had no right to poke fun at how petrifying this was. My body careened through hundreds of feet of altitude in a short span, while the boost pack's vibrations chipped in with more insistence. It was only when the ground was a skyscraper's length away that it slowed me to a leaf's glide; I floated on a bubble of air, placed down with a gentle touch. My feet pressed onto the lunar surface, with less force than if I was hopping out of bed. The predators touched down without issue as well, slowly lowered to the ground in tiny increments.

The perfect calculation of the jet pack's computer was remarkable. I was beyond grateful to have my legs on solid ground; now, it was time to get moving toward the complex that could be detonated in our face at any moment. Across the surface of the moon, other groups would be storming similar installations without pausing for respite. Carlos checked the HUD within his helmet, before pointing toward a rover that had plopped down to the moon with elegance. It was awkward to run in my space suit under the low gravity, especially since the predators could maintain their pace with a light skip. I found extra energy for my legs as a rocket landed just shy of our position—the Kolshians had spotted us.

It's going to be a long few minutes driving toward the base. Thankfully, I

don't think they have a large supply of missiles on hand, but they will be shooting at us the whole way.

My lungs and core burned as we neared the rover, though I forced myself to press onward. Samantha ducked behind the wheel of the vehicle, while Carlos ushered me into the back compartment. As soon as we were inside, I collapsed from exhaustion; it would take a few minutes to catch my breath. The male guard took a brief look at me, before popping open a hatch on the vehicle. The human hoisted himself up behind a machine gun fixed to the top, just enough that his head poked out of the rover. His gloved hands turned the turret in all directions, and searched for targets.

Samantha finished plugging in the coordinates, before turning to face me. "Sovlin, you're gonna be the loader. You see those ammo boxes? Load them into the main gun, and don't fuck it up."

I pushed myself to my feet, and studied the task at paw. "Yeah, I can do that. We don't use ground vehicles too often in the Federation…nothing like these…but I've seen a few during Arxur raids. It won't be a problem."

"Better not be, or you're walking to the base."

The rover was rolling ahead toward the Kolshian installation, and without sound in space, it was impossible to gauge when we were being fired at. I could see Carlos firing off rounds at targets, but I decided to keep to my lane and help him reload. It was the human's role to survey the battlefield, and assess hostile activities. Hopefully, the vehicle's armor could absorb kinetics sent off by Kolshians who saw us coming. An army of military space rovers, dropped from the sky, plowing across the cratered surface…we were impossible to miss. Perhaps it was better that I wasn't relegated to the stressful role of gunner, requiring myself to be exposed to anything sailing through the area.

Samantha, as the driver, wasn't content without a view of the action. The rover lacked a windshield like I'd expect from exploration vehicles, but it seemed to have a periscope she could peer out of. I kept to my dutiful task, refraining from asking questions about our progress. Minutes of sightless transit had me uncertain how much further we had to press on to our destination; from the way Carlos' legs had tensed up, we were receiving heavier amounts of fire. I knew that meant we had to be getting close,

though none of us would exit the vehicle until we were on their doorstep. There was no telling whether UN snipers had been successful in eliminating the self-destruct keyholders.

I guess we'll find out by whether the base goes "Boom!" as we bust into the command center. Let's not think about that. I'll assume we get control of those stupid lasers, and then my knowledge from defending the cradle might come in handy for how to use them.

Carlos continued to dish out bursts of fire, while helping Samantha keep an eye out for traps. The two humans communicated information only when it was necessary, otherwise preferring to fixate on our life-or-death circumstances. I was impressed as always by their efficiency and composure under extreme peril. The Terrans' confidence rubbed off on me a little, despite how insane this mission was. There weren't enough Kolshian foot soldiers defending the base to hold us back, as long as we could absorb an influx of fire a little longer. The rover appeared to have built-in systems that could mess with missiles' homing systems, or destroy them in flight. Explosives were the greatest threat to us in transit, and they could be neutralized.

The incredible machinations crafted by these predators might be enough to get us to our destination in one piece. I couldn't help but give a satisfied grunt, knowing how the tide of the space battle might turn if we gained control of the planetary defenses. Such powerful weapons were a nightmare for the UN armada to deal with, something that could smite our most advanced spacecraft in one hit. Without these installations, the shadow fleet would be ill-equipped against our particle beams, nanodrones, and other superior munitions.

I decided to break my silence for a quick word of encouragement to Carlos. I wanted to share the triumphant feeling coursing through my veins with the guard who'd always given moral guidance of the highest integrity—the one who believed in a brighter future, and tried to understand what drove me from the beginning.

However, as my gaze turned to the predator to weigh his demeanor, I saw a sudden spasm pass through his form. His head made a quiet snap backward in the hatch, and his hands slipped off of the turret. The human's legs crumpled underneath his bulky form, as if a rug was yanked from under him. Panic raced through my heart,

realizing what had happened; I rushed to his side, and kneeled over his downed form. Samantha also whipped around in the driver's seat, yelling Carlos' name through our comms link—to no response.

My eyes peered at the bullet hole through the front of his spacesuit helmet, exposing the human to the vacuum, and the crimson blood bubbling at the cracked edges. Horror took over my consciousness as I scrambled for a way to keep the kind-hearted predator alive.

Chapter 169

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 24, 2137

I desperately shoved my paw over the bullet hole on Carlos' helmet, trying to seal the gap that exposed him to the vacuum. Viscous blood adhered to my suit, slathering over the smooth exterior. How was I supposed to give the human medical attention, when removing his mask would freeze him and strip him of all oxygen? Samantha knelt by my side, her body language distraught. I could see her checking the wrist readout of the male predator's vitals, while I desperately shook his unmoving shoulder. Despite my best efforts at revival, his form was limp against my touch.

Whatever happens to me, I will be enduring as a tree and fierce as a bear. Our past doesn't define us, Carlos had told me, while describing the green markings on his arm.

When all of this first began, I couldn't have imagined how much grief I'd feel, huddling over a predator's corpse. I could feel the rover trundling along toward the base, autopilot still in gear even as Sam had crawled away from the driver's seat. Carlos needed to get back up and man the turret; it was a single bullet! An apex hunter, the most powerful creature on untamed Earth, shouldn't be downed by one lump of metal. Terrans were supposed to be "enduring as a tree" and "fierce as a bear." I punched at his chest through the thick spacesuit, frustrated that it wasn't moving.

"Wake up!" I screamed; Sam winced from my volume, as the comm link was still open. "There's going to be humanitarian missions after the war, the chance to do good in the galaxy like you loved doing on Earth. You can't just fucking quit!"

Carlos' form didn't budge or react an inch, offering no signs of life. I could see the female guard shaking her head, and trying to collect herself. Samantha wasn't doing anything to help patch our friend up, though I could hear her sniffling. How could she give up on him like an Arxur, not doing a single thing to mend a wounded friend? These were predators with empathy, not callous monsters like the grays and the Kolshians who left their weaklings behind!

And you are not going to refer to me as 'predator' again. I could hear his stern voice chastising me, with impatience for my antics toward the Arxur. What Carlos told me a little while ago served as a reminder of how he was my first friend—the one who sought to understand my motives, in spite of what I'd done. *I listened to your spiel on torturing an innocent human, and tried to empathize with you.*

Every word the human had said to me was rushing back burying me with an emotional avalanche. I remembered the time I'd saved his life on the cattle ship, and first realized that I cared for my guards—an alarming thought, back then. I reminisced when he visited me in my prison cell on Skalga, and had been the only one who could restrain his anger enough to speak to me. When I was at my lowest, thinking Gojids were monsters after the omnivore revelations, it'd been Carlos who asked other humans not to bring that up to me. He'd known how I felt about being a meat-eater, and how my entire life had collapsed in on itself.

"There's a Tilfish right there. They're g-going to…give you a hug," I blubbered, with tears streaming down my face. The guard's fear of the insectoids had been on display on several occasions, to my prior amusement. "You've got to move. It's very creepy, right?"

I turned Carlos' helmet from side to side, like I was rolling a ball back and forth on the carpet. There was no resistance; the stupid human wasn't answering. How hard was it to give any form of response, when he was freaking me out like this? The predator had known the risks, but I couldn't accept that he was just…*gone.* Snot bubbled in my nose, as I imagined what he would say about catching a bullet in the wrong place. He'd always been much too calm about potential dangers, while I'd been the panicky one in our sticky predicaments.

We always hope for the best, but no combat situation is a guarantee. Just breathe, buddy, the guard had said on the submarine, when we were trying a last-ditch strategy to evade a torpedo.

"I won't breathe! I won't listen to you!" I screeched, as I sank to my knees in despair. If I were being honest with myself, I'd realized the truth the second I saw his wound. "Carlos?"

Samantha's hands sank deep into my arm, and the human yanked me to my feet with force. I shrieked, swinging my claws toward her in a clumsy gesture; despite the bulky suit, the predator's reflexes

made it easy for her to duck. Her chest was shaking, betraying her own emotions, but I could feel her binocular eyes leveling me with a pointed stare. She prevented me from returning to my attempts to resuscitate Carlos, and stood between me and the fallen soldier.

“Listen! Carlos is dead, Sovlin; he’s gone!” her growling voice had taken the form of a commanding yell. “I checked his vitals. There’s no heartbeat or brain activity. There is *nothing—*fuck all we can do. We need to keep moving.”

I stumbled back in denial. “No. You’re wrong. I’m not leaving—”

Samantha forcefully jostled my shoulders, and lowered her voice to a sympathetic growl. “Carlos was killed, instantly. If someone doesn’t get back on that gun, so we can defend ourselves moving forward, he died for nothing. *Everyone* who’s died in this war, died for nothing if we fail here! Plus, we need to make the fuckers who shot him pay. I’d get on the gun myself, but I’m the only one who knows how to run the vehicle’s OS.”

“The gun. Yeah, nobody’s s-shooting it…”

“Snap out of it! I’ll watch our navigations, but keep back here to help you reload; be quicker than you doing it yourself. You make some Kolshians’ heads explode, and we take the fucking base, for Carlos and for humanity. You just need to stand there, head low. Pull the trigger, bullets spray: nice and simple. Can you handle that?”

“Yes. I miss him already, Sam. I…I always hated losing a soldier.”

The predator’s shoulders slumped. “I miss him too. He was more than just a soldier…he was my friend. Our moral compass. *When* we get his body back to our ship, I’ll see that he gets the burial and the honors he deserved.”

I imitated a human nod in a daze, and tried to move through the grief suffocating me. None of what just happened felt real; it was all so sudden, how Carlos’ life was snapped out of existence. Bitterness hardened within my heart, as I thought about the Kolshian in the base who’d shot my friend. I was going to make them pay with their own life, returning the favor. There was plenty of anger to grant me courage; despite how I’d seen the human sniped out from behind the turret, I moved his gunner’s tether to my suit. It should’ve been me gunned down in the first place, bringing it full circle with how

I'd wished to sacrifice myself for my crimes.

I used to think that I don't deserve happiness, but it's not about that anymore. Carlos doesn't have the checkered past I do. It's a basic equation that I deserved to bite the dust more than him.

My head poked out through the hatch, and my claws didn't feel like my own as they hooked around the firing mechanism. Kolshian defenders had taken up positions with machine guns along the balconies of their installation, which looked like a glorified tower wedged between expansive weapons. Bullets assailed our rover; though their flight and collision with our armor was inaudible, the blurs of motions blinked across my vision. I could see one make a close shave to my position, while dust ahead of us was churned up by a vaulted missile. Another explosive appeared to be on target for our position, but was snapped off by the vehicle's automated interceptors.

It was chaos on the lunar surface—hundreds of rovers rolled over the bumpy terrain to our destination, just as I knew was happening at the other outposts. There were a few hundred Kolshians on site to defend the complexes, but they would be overrun if we reached them with these numbers. We needed to keep our vehicle intact for a few more minutes to reach our target; I was thirsting for blood in predatory fashion, embroiled in pain from the loss of Carlos. The fresh wounds drove me to sort out the kinks of the technology quickly. The gun was able to pump out multiple rounds in a minute, and the bullets could clear the miles-long gap without wavering. I set to gouging holes in the balcony, hoping to obliterate those bastards with lead.

"When it's time to hop out, we'll join up with the rovers to our left and right," Sam explained over the comm link. "Your rifle is still strapped to you, right?"

While I'd shifted my gun out of my way to operate the turret, I could feel it tucked against my side. "Yes. I have a visual on the base; I'll know when we're there."

"It'll be obvious because the rover will *stop*. Assuming the squids don't have the good sense to duck and cover inside, we can shoot the outdoor campers from the rover…but I imagine they're retreating."

Through my heads-up magnification, I could see Kolshians making a

break for the entrances. Scowling with unadulterated rage, I swiveled the turret toward their destination to choke it with fire; bullets nailed several soldiers in the back, liberating them of their violet blood just as they'd spilled Carlos' crimson life force. The smarter ones were able to crawl inside using corpses as cover, but a few defenders were trapped outside as our tanks rolled closer. They were being peppered by hundreds of turrets, with the balcony wall looking more like paper ribbons. Unable to find an easily available target, I pumped extra lead into the corpses for good measure. If any of those assholes were playing dead, they weren't going to be *playing* much longer.

Minutes whizzed by in an adrenaline-fueled blur, as the rover rolled toward its destination. I eviscerated one Kolshian who stood for the briefest second, before they could fire a shot at me or one of our allies. Samantha, meanwhile, was keeping an eye out for any mines through her periscope; she pointed out one metal circle hidden deceptively on the ground for my HUD, which I then set off prematurely. It seemed that the enemy's missile supply was depleted, but running into the barrier of landmines could upturn a rover and maim its inhabitants. I was grateful the predator's eyes were keen, because my focus was single-mindedly on revenge.

I can't wait to get out onto solid ground, and execute these fuckers up close and personal. How many humans…how many innocent people have to die before their bloodlust is slaked? Anyone still serving the Kolshian army is a true predator, and deserves to suffer for everything they've taken from me!

Once we were within half a kilometer, the Terran snipers were able to set up shop; their work was quiet and efficient, detectable only through the appearance of tiny holes in the windows. Anyone visible, including the Kolshians with the self-destruct key, was picked off with the masterfulness of a hunter focusing on their prey. Terrans with perfect accuracy kept watch on the door, blowing one foe's head off as soon as he set foot into the command center. No one was going to be retrieving those arming authorizations. Our enemies were going to face *real* justice; the damned primates better not take prisoners, this time. Beyond my steaming anger, we couldn't afford to tote more bodies back to our ships.

I kept my head low as the rover slowed, parking itself by the decimated complex. "Hey, Sam? Something just occurred to me."

“Hm?” the human offered.

“What’s to stop the Kolshians from blowing the planetary defenses off the map, with us inside?”

“Same reason humanity sent us here, instead of picking ’em off from orbit. Too dangerous to take a direct flight at the lasers; it would’ve cost us a fuck ton of ships. You gotta have precision bombing to ensure you take out something this small, but I imagine when they realize it’s turned against ’em, they’ll try. They weren’t expecting us to thwart the self-destruct orders.”

“So it could still blow up with us inside?”

“Only a small number of humans are sticking around to operate the controls, after we clear the place. We’re going to get back in the rover, and catch a drone shuttle back to our ship, at the evac point under friendly-controlled skies. Damned if I’m going to leave Carlos to…decay at the ass end of this moon.”

“He should be brought home. Even if he wasn’t tight with his family, there’s m-many people who will grieve his passing and celebrate his life.”

“A life that should’ve been longer, but that’s a tired story I could say about my ‘dead as a doornail’ husband too. Fucking hell, now’s not the time to get all teary-eyed. Get out of the vehicle. Now.”

I ducked back through the rover’s hatch, and bounced out after Sam toward the exit. The human fell into a pack with other soldiers, before we ascended the balcony stairs in a purposeful formation. Kolshian bodies littered the upper deck, with a handful having been picked off back on the ground. The rovers’ onslaught had shredded any living enemies, especially as UN vehicles armed with grenades got close; as always, the predators’ killing technology from their *pre-FTL* days exceeded anything seen in the galaxy. The extremity of the wars they’d fought amongst themselves, brutal and bloody, showed in the advancement of their technology. With how quickly the Yotul were catching up without shackles, it raised the question of whether Leirn had a similar history.

What will Onso and Tyler say, assuming we make it back…but with Carlos in a body bag? It’s like every thought brings me back to the fact that he’s gone forever. No more advice, shared meals, or adventures together. Irrevocably gone.

I knew I needed to keep my composure, unless I wanted to bear responsibility for Sam garnering the same fate. The Kolshian command center was kept locked down by snipers, but we needed to flush out any stragglers taking refuge inside the obfuscating walls. As much as I longed to be the one to end these miserable bastards' lives, the humans were taking charge. A soldier clicked open the door, lobbing a grenade with ease through the lax gravity. Our helmet HUD switched over to night vision, which allowed us to see in the darkened kitchen. A Kolshian was trying to hide behind a trash can, but I fired a shot into his leg. While he jerked to the ground, I stomped up to him and placed a bullet straight through his helmet from point-blank range.

The Terrans were shooting on sight as well, already poking gun barrels into closets and adjacent hallways. There wasn't time for any unwanted surrenders, to my relief; with how willing the Kolshians were to fight dirty and utilize the UN's morality against them, it was impossible to trust any attempts to turn themselves in. I fell back in at Samantha's side, as she kept an eye for any ambushes from behind. We followed a snaking corridor into a mess hall, where a few petrified hostiles shot at us from under tables. One bullet connected with a Terran's leg, but thankfully, the foes' low positioning made it difficult for them to fire on vital areas in close combat. I ducked enough to pump several bullets in quick succession, as the predators dispatched the other enemies with breathtaking ease.

"In ground combat, you guys far outshine them—just like you showed you're not in the same bracket during the ship boardings," I remarked.

Samantha finished patching the bullet hole in our wounded's suit leg, securing his air supply. "We're trained properly and keep our wits. Federation fear and Kolshian complacency don't make for a good standing army. That's *if* they weren't outnumbered and blown the fuck out by the rovers."

"I'm glad they were outclassed, because it means we can get control of the planetary defenses. That'll turn the tide of the battle and distract the shadow fleet…I hope. Carlos' sacrifice has to mean something."

"Let's actually get those lasers in our possession, then we'll think

about winning this shitshow. Just keep your head on a swivel. We don't need any traps or tricks catching us off guard."

"I don't need my head in a swivel. I don't have binocular vision."

"Hmph. You still need to look behind you, Baldy."

I chuckled, before quieting myself with guilt.

"What?" Sam huffed. "Carlos wouldn't expect me to stop taking swipes at you for anyone's funeral."

The UN soldiers finished sweeping the hall, before progressing down the final stretch to the command center; the complex was hardly spacious for its occupants, with few luxuries present. The premises were reserved for packing weapons to fend off raids and invasions. If that fact allowed us to reach the command center and bring the planetary defenses under our control quicker, then it was a blessing. The Terran who'd taken the bullet in the leg was able to bounce after us, having gotten a tight patch secured around his perforation. Given that the command center was under lockdown by human snipers, there weren't likely to be many more enemies to clean up.

Samantha found a single Kolshian, crouching outside the final entry, and gunned him down without remorse. The Terrans didn't relax their guard, despite the high likelihood that the vicinity was clear of hostiles. I was grateful that most defenders fell against the rovers, saving me from watching more humans perish at my feet. The senseless losses our side had incurred throughout this battle were staggering enough, just from the overhead skirmish. I waited as we communicated to our snipers that we were entering the command center, so watchful allies wouldn't pick us off at the first sign of movement. There was no time to waste in redirecting the planetary defenses, for the sake of our fleet.

"Alright, let's go!" Samantha barked.

I followed the predator soldiers into the command center, and watched a tech specialist work on switching the defenses' directives. Turning my gaze starward, I wished that Carlos was here to see our mission reach its successful end. There were still a herdload of enemies running amok above us, and we had no update on how our armada had fared in our absence. Nonetheless, I was certain these seized assets could give the United Nations the chance to put the

shadow fleet down. Because of our actions on lunar soil, humanity might be able to level the playing field around Aafa's orbit.

Chapter 170

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 25, 2137

Landing on *Liberty's Bastion*, I could see the fruits of humanity's ventures into the universe. The colonists, who'd been evacuated under threat of the Mileau shadow fleet "curing" them, had returned to the frontier. Secretary-General Zhao was making his first in-person visit to the colony, and agreed to meet me here: a shorter journey than traveling to Earth. The dignitary knew I'd like to pay a visit to Felra, who was now a permanent resident of the settlement. Her last message had been an irritating remark about how she thought I'd look cute in a sequined hat, so she'd bought one for next time we met. *Dreadful*. I would have to face that insufferable idea; however, the purpose of my visit was to brief Zhao on the rebellion's progress, and inquire about the status of the Battle of Aafa.

The reality was that we didn't have ships to lose to contribute to a direct assault on the Kolshian homeworld; our tactics had always been guerilla warfare, through and through. There was nothing glamorous in breaking up supply lines and utilizing hit-and-run attacks against ship contingents, but it was the surest play for our purpose. If our rebellion broke apart, that would mean the Arxur had no optimistic future in the galaxy—neither Giznel nor Ilthiss would detach themselves from cruelty. I couldn't believe what UN intelligence had told me about the Dominion fighting alongside the shadow fleet.

I never imagined they'd so openly show their mutual interest in continuing the war. Giznel must be desperate to stop humanity from coming for Wriss now, regardless of how Earth has "refrained" from openly waging war against them.

The majority of the Dominion ships being at the Kolshian homeworld meant that each sector was left with sparse defenses. We couldn't resist targeting ship counts in the meager thousands, depriving Betterment of much-needed numbers…assuming the band at Aafa fell. The copious spacecraft kept in Wriss' central sector was halved; my rebellion hadn't gunned for them first, since my next

plan was to trumpet a certain video through open channels. Command vessels at Aafa were jamming comms to prevent the footage of Giznel and Nikonus' collusion from being passed along, but the brass weren't back babysitting the leftovers. That strategy had flipped several Arxur vessels that I'd been able to contact in the external sectors.

Lisa breathed in the fresh air, smiling. "This is a lovely planet. Regardless of what happens at Aafa…maybe more so, if we win, I bet humanity is going to spread out. Like them. I think this colony has a lot of potential, to be the start of something new."

"It would also be the perfect world to hide secret experiments," Olek challenged, with dramatic arm motions. "Much farther away from Earth than the three colonies that popped up in our territory. We could work on bioweapons and no one would ever know!"

"Olek, I've never met anyone as paranoid as you. You need medication."

"I do not! It's not paranoid when I'm right. It'd be *easier* if I was wrong, but other people just miss these things!"

Though our posse of three (with Kaisal staying behind to avoid offending local leadership) was standing just in front of our landing ramp, the settlement looked ramshackle and unimpressive. There were two large buildings that I could scan with my visual translators, with one labeled a communal dormitory and the other as town hall. The sole independent constructions were hab modules in front of farming fields, where Earth crops had been planted. There was little in the way of shops, apart from market stalls for food and general goods. The Mazics were constructing an embassy with proper elegance, but that was still a work-in-progress.

I thought I recalled some tidbit from Felra about the Terrans opening a new seed vault on *Liberty's Bastion*. That was the closest thing to a government mission on this world. There was likely a lab-grown meat factory tucked away somewhere, far from any Mazic eyes; I guess that was hidden, since it might qualify as a "bioweapon" by the Federation's standards. Olek needed a reality check on his fantastical conspiracies, especially after the jaw-dropping revelations of late had encouraged his outlandish theories. The glasses-wearing human was talking about *mind-reading* technology just last week—it couldn't get more detached from the

realm of probability.

I flared my nostrils. “Silence! The likeliest secret on this colony is the fact that an Arxur is landing, within Mazic territory, yes? I recall they weren’t pleased to see me at the Summit, so it’s bold to invite me here.”

“It’s our colony.” Lisa shrugged, bringing her arms closer to her chest as the chilly breeze nipped at her. “We can do what we want, though I don’t imagine Zhao wants to step on any toes. This planet is perfect for habitation, and we wouldn’t want the Mazics rethinking their gift. I wouldn’t mind settling down in a place like this.”

“I thought you wanted to open a coffee shop, and bring people together.”

“That’s why there’s opportunity here. Earth will pour tons of time and resources into building this place up. There’s no conveniences or entertainment spots here yet, so the market isn’t saturated like it is at home. Places like this could become something *more* than rushed attempts to get humans out of Sol.”

“I agree,” Zhao chimed in, having approached quietly from the side. “There were limitations from my target date of having residents here, and the United Nations’ three other *Bastion* colonies, by 2136’s end. In peacetime, we’ll have higher standards for new construction. If all goes well, we’re the de facto power in the galaxy —and we need to look the part. It’s wonderful that you could make it out here, Isif.”

I turned my maw to face the human. “Secretary-General. I eagerly anticipate an update on the Battle of Aafa. But first, may I inquire how you’re hiding my visit from the Mazics?”

“I’m not. We don’t plan to build our alliance on lies and secrecy, and foster mistrust within the Sapient Coalition. President Cupo knows who you are, and I’ve told him that we’re coordinating our war efforts with a rebellion leader in the area. He doesn’t approve but won’t interfere.”

“Very well. I assume you wish to speak of the war efforts. I’d like to discuss further where the Arxur stand after this is over, because I believe my recent efforts made Giznel’s capitulation likely. All I need is an update on Aafa.”

“I’ll let you begin with a summary of what the rebellion has been up to, and then I’ll bring you up to speed on the battle. Don’t worry, I’ll point you to the starship docking port to find Felra. We don’t get much traffic here, but she fits in well as an inspector.”

“Felra is a strange Dossur, but I am grateful for that annoying rodent’s safety, Míngzé. How much do you already know about our plans from Jones and her informant?”

Lisa huffed, as I pointed at her with my tail. “I am not Jones’ informant!”

“You are always in touch with her, and promised to ‘handle her’ like you have some inside road? She always seems to know my plans. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how that might occur. I am not the Federation.”

Olek narrowed his eyes. “You know, that makes a lot of sense! No wonder you shoot down my conspiracies; you’re one of them!”

“Coming from the guy who *instantly* believed Isif was a UN spy,” Lisa Reynolds shot back.

“And he *was* a spy for us!”

Secretary-General Zhao’s eyebrows shot upward, as though he were conceding the point to Oleksiy. “I have no idea if Reynolds works for Jones, though I wouldn’t put it past her—and I know she wouldn’t tell me. Old habits die hard. Still, I’m grateful that you three seem to have bonded. Now, forgive my impatience, but I’d like to get back to keeping tabs on Aafa as soon as we’re done. Can you fill me in on your recent whereabouts?”

The entire goal of my actions had been to bring as many Arxur to my side as possible; I wanted to have enough people left to cobble together a society. Turning Chief Hunter Ilthiss had hopefully been an asset to humanity’s cause, but with nothing left to lose, I’d been determined to convert more Dominion personnel. From the secondhand information Jones had given me, I knew that the command ships at Aafa were blocking the Terrans from passing along Betterment’s treason. It was my belief that we’d achieved a workaround, though the fallout remained to be seen.

I have no idea how humanity is holding up against two galactic powers. Any chaos or doubt within Arxur ranks could aid their mission.

“My people approached the vessels left behind in each sector, and

forwarded the video of Giznel and Nikonus colluding. After the viewing of this footage, they were asked to join my side; a large percentage have committed forces to the rebellion, which takes Wriss' ship count down a notch further. We also have deigned to launch attacks against any who didn't join our side. This should help humanity to gather a Dominion surrender, yes?" I asked.

The Secretary-General grimaced. "I gave you my word that we'll help your cause, once Aafa is dealt with, and I'll follow through. The less ships they have, the better. I don't imagine you find fault in having more ships at your disposal either. However, I confess it would be of more immediate use to connect with the Arxur fighting us at this moment."

"You're in luck. The Dominion does not have command ships to jam signals out here, since they are at Aafa. However, any fleet needs to communicate amongst itself. Specific channels are open so Chief Hunters can stay in touch with their sector, and be apprised of any attacks back here. If it comes from approved vessels and is framed as a status report, leadership has no reason not to pass it along. I have given pointers that should help some Arxur abetting the Kolshians see the truth…very soon."

Olek flashed his teeth. "Isif is saying that the video will be playing mid-battle. We should have at least some Dominion assets turning to our side, and throwing a wrench in the Kolshians' alliance."

"I thought it was wise to pass along the message to each sector in person, so there was no chance the Dominion could catch wind of our intent and block the video. It's important that they're blindsided," Lisa said.

Zhao tapped his chin. "I agree that we don't want them to get a heads-up. I'll brief UN Command, and we'll fill the fleet in once we receive visual confirmation of hijinks. Might I say, excellent work, Isif. Without ever needing to send a warship of your own, you're responsible for all of the extra help we've gotten. From saving Earth to swaying your people, don't think we don't know that you've done more than anyone for humanity's cause."

"Your cause is my cause. Ending the Federation. A better future. No more sapient cattle," I responded. "Might I ask what you mean by 'all the help?' This means Ilthiss has been useful perhaps, yet your reference seems to be corresponding multiple parties?"

“The Duerten Shield have come to our aid too. That’s in no small part thanks to you, risking your people to stop the Kolshians from eradicating Kalqua—when you had nothing to gain. It’s telling that our chances ride on the friends and allies we have struggled so hard to get. We did what was right by ourselves and by the laws of decency, even when it was taxing. Our decisions haven’t been perfect, and there’s been some things we had to do that were unpleasant, but we opened enough eyes to the truth for it to make a difference.”

“You say ‘we’ as if I were a part of the outreach to the leaf-lickers.”

“You were, Isif. I’m proud to call you a friend of the United Nations. While I cannot guarantee what the Sapient Coalition will think about the Arxur, after this is all said and done, I promise I’ll try to do right by you. I’ll try to build a path to reconciliation.”

Lisa chuckled. “That won’t be easy, sir.”

“Believe me, I know. There are so many broken relationships, from centuries of cyclical hatred, that need mending. There are trillions of traumatized people—freed cattle, those grieving worlds that are bombed-out husks, brainwashed citizens with lives rooted in fear, and victims from the *literal past*. Trying to set the galaxy back on track will be a battle of its own.”

“You’ve come a long way from protecting humanity’s interests above all others,” I remarked.

“We gain nothing from the suffering of other races. Peace, equality, and community *are* humanity’s interests. It’s the only way Earth will ever be a safe, prosperous member of the Orion neighborhood.”

“You say that as if you believe they can truly accept predators.”

“I do. With time, I think they could even accept the Arxur.”

My nostrils flared, considering whether that could be a possibility. Before everything that had happened in recent months, I wouldn’t have believed it was possible for the prey to forgive what we’d done—and for us to forgive the long ago curse of starvation. That was before I learned that the Federation wasn’t the sole party responsible for our plight; Betterment had been the agent that wiped out our cattle, and encouraged us to seek out a sapient food source. Likewise, the herbivores had learned that the Kolshians were complicit in everything the Arxur did, with the power to stop

it at any time. Chief Nikonus wouldn't have allowed a predator race to be peaceful, and used us as a tool to justify their control.

There were so many things I'd seen on a personal level that gave me hope for the future. Felra had been willing to accept me, even after learning that I was an Arxur; that deranged Dossur tried to get a rise out of me often, and once dabbled in eating Olek's beef jerky. Governor Tarva had been willing to work with me during the cattle exchange; she'd argued in my favor when the humans imprisoned me, and again at the Summit. There was the fact that the *majority* of thirty-eight herbivore species voted to let me speak at that Summit…and that the vote to join a human-led venture was still unanimous after Zhao admitted to working with me. There was even the Yotul reaching out after the event, and being pleasant to work with during battle. I'd liked and respected the feisty marsupial I spoke with during the fight for Kalqua.

There's even that the Mazics didn't throw a fit, with word that an Arxur Chief Hunter was landing in a predator enclave within their territory. Things have changed.

"I hope so. It seems that we will be on the outside looking in for some time," I replied.

Zhao tilted his head. "That's why I'm personally making an effort to keep you in the loop. You're as much a friend of humanity as anyone in the Sapient Coalition. Just to drive my point home, the risks you've taken for us haven't gone unnoticed. Now, I'm sure you've been waiting to hear about the Battle of Aafa."

"That would be appreciated."

"In short, we've pushed through to Aafa, and the planetary defenses are under the control of our ground troops. It's my expectation that we'll know who wins or loses this fight by the end of the day. It's not like that's the last leg of the journey, but with the new information you gave us about turning Dominion forces, I'm hopeful that humanity *won't* be searching for a new home as of tomorrow. Once the result is locked, I'll make sure intelligence passes that along to you."

"The fate of my people is in humanity's hands. I hope that you will succeed."

"I hope so too, but there's nothing else either of us can do. You've

achieved more than I could've hoped for, so take comfort in that and save the worrying for another day. Go enjoy your time with Felra, *Siffy*. Ask for her at the docking port over there…she should be on call now."

"I will. Good luck, Zhao. Whatever happens, it's been an honor to work with you and all of humanity."

The Terran leader smiled. "Likewise."

Olek and Lisa tailed behind me, as I padded off in the direction Zhao was pointing. It was a strange world where I could express my feelings, and meet up with an herbivore friend who cared about me against the odds. There was nothing else I could do at this point, to aid the rebellion and the UN fleet's chances. I hoped that my final contribution, ensuring that Dominion forces by Aafa got wind of Giznel and Nikonus' scheming, paid dividends; it *had* to work. How could Arxur not turn on Betterment, hearing how our suffering was their intent…in conjunction with the Federation?

For all intents and purposes, I was assuming the news would cause a significant schism in Arxur ranks. Ilthiss couldn't be the only one to react to the truth with outrage. With the numbers a bit more in their favor, humanity might be able to eliminate the shadow fleet from Aafa's orbit. This would be the defining moment, where a verdict would be passed down about whether sapient predators had the right to exist in this galaxy.

Chapter 171

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 25, 2137

After the human troops leapt from our ship toward the lunar surface, survival up in the stars proved to be a harrowing task.

There were several factors that left our warship in a precarious spot. On a grander scale, the gap we'd cleared with three rounds of antimatter bombs had sealed. The UN drones had borrowed seconds for us against hopeless numbers, falling by the thousands; half of our allies were situated on the other side of the shadow fleet, but were unable to help us retreat due to their own problems. Turning back wasn't an option, and with that door closed, it was a matter of avoiding immediate death. The nuclear weapons tucked away on the moon were launched as soon as we got past the fleet, leaving us quite the radioactive payload to evade. Drones scrambled to cut them down, despite having Kolshians spitting plasma at their heels.

While our drones on this side of the globe had suffered heavy casualties, manned ships hadn't gone unscathed either. Our vessel had taken a beating, with several direct hits to our underbelly, and we lacked any shields once those were taken down. Honestly, if someone didn't engineer a way to facilitate a shield current despite magnetoresistance, they were all but useless in future battles; the United Nations hadn't scrounged up any alternative innovations on that front yet. While I had my eyes on any missile launches, we couldn't afford to take many more hits from conventional weapons as well; our craft was hanging together by a thread, with a single love tap able to cause structural integrity to unravel.

Even if Sovlin, Carlos, and Samantha are able to gain control of the ground stations, that will take time. I'm not sure how we're supposed to hold out against nukes, free shots for planetary defense lasers, and shadow fleet ships.

The Terran fighters were mere nuisances to the drones, and were getting their asses handed to them. Though it was difficult to discern through the sea of sensor blips, the Duerten Shield and Sapient Coalition seemed to be struggling against a Dominion assault. The Arxur had brought tons of spacecraft into the fray;

while the avian alliance was showing novel aggression, the grays were the seasoned veterans in that department. The carnivores hadn't been expecting such a fight from the Homogeneity, but they adapted their strategies swiftly. Concurrently, on the far side of Aafa, Chief Hunters Ilthiss and Usliff's fleet had been reduced to stray remnants. The UN drones and Technocracy craft there were left outnumbered, on their own, and unable to join our engagement by the moon.

"This is *not* how we wanted the battle to go. Particle beams alone won't win this fight," I hissed.

Tyler scratched his blond scalp. "Let's hope taking the planetary defenses is enough. We don't have many tricks left in the bag. 'Less ya got something in mind, Onso?"

"My suggestion is to get somewhere those lasers can't have free rein to shoot us. Except we can't go back the way we came, and we've suffered enormous losses. The way I see it, we just need more ships. The Shield and Ilthiss just don't cut it."

"This goes to show why we ain't provoked the Dominion. We didn't wanna fight them and the shadow fleet at the same time, or for Betterment to know how much we had their number. Guess that ship has sailed, huh?"

"I think if things get much worse, the Duerten will follow through on their promise to bomb Aafa. Since we are on the brink of defeat, maybe you should tell them to."

My friend's jaw muscles tightened. "I don't want to authorize that."

"I know. Neither do I, after seeing how senseless the glassing of Caato was…but even if we flip the planetary defenses, it'll be too late to bring back our losses. We might've lost fifty thousand ships across all our allies, which is a large chunk of our fleet. Enemy casualties are *maybe* twenty thousand so far, and that's almost solely from particle weapons…which most of our fleet doesn't have. I don't see a scenario where we win here."

The sensors officer's scowl deepened, displeased with my suggestions. His blue eyes seemed to be counting the minutes that had passed since Sovlin and his team leapt into space; they should be barging into the complexes by now, given how close their landing sites were. It was a miracle we'd managed to keep out of

range and alive that long. What would happen to the troops if we fell, and they were left stranded on that moon with limited oxygen? What would become of humanity and the Yotul, if our all-out attack came up short? I supposed before drastic, scorched-earth action would be authorized, we should see if the planetary defenses could be impactful enough.

A laser from the moon was identified as aiming at us, leaving us mere seconds to swerve off its vector. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, as my brain came up empty of any last-ditch strategies. We would've won this battle if it was just the Kolshians; we'd done admirably to make it this far, with the Dominion joining in. But now, I could see two shadow fleet vessels tearing after us, lining us up for when their plasma weapons recharged. I desperately passed along the nearest drone's coordinates to weapons, but thanks to the foe's dramatic twirl, our shot didn't cripple it like I'd hoped. It merely made a dent in its armor, so meaningless that the hostile didn't slow in its pursuit.

There had been a momentary pause in the planetary defense firing, but I could see the entire complex lighting up below us now. It was a shame we were out of bombing range, and that we'd committed to foot soldiers taking the installation regardless. I fumbled with the sensor readout, searching to map the laser's path. How were we meant to dodge two plasma beams that would tear off any second, *and* a laser? We still had a physical barrier to deploy to impede one incoming munition, but we couldn't shield both sides. I made a split-second decision, and relayed the suggestion to drop it in front of the shadow fleet. While the lasers were stronger, the chances of evading synchronized plasma arcs were slim without some fortress.

Captain Monahan's weary eyes turned to the bridge crew. "We've received word from our unit leaders on the ground. All planetary defenses are under our control, except for a single module that was able to initiate self-destruct."

I could see an explosion near the shadowy border of the moon, where sunlight wasn't illuminating its cratered surface. The sensors readout had switched the defense complexes to friendly indicators, after that new info was fed into its database. I tilted my head in confusion, wondering why the nearest lasers were powering up and pointing at us. My befuddlement turned into a laugh, perhaps a sign that I was delirious from the stress of the battle. We might not be

on track to win the battle, but it was amusing that the shadow fleet had no idea what was coming. A bluish flash radiated from the powerful weapons, and I tracked its lightning-quick path across the viewport.

The complex's computer had charted the optimal angle to sizzle through both Kolshian drones, splicing them clean in half before the algorithms realized what changed. Planetary defenses revved to life on our side, finally granting some breathing room to our battered fleet. Without having to worry about flying straight into a stream of hostile lasers, I relayed a suggested course to sensors; it would take us as close to the lunar surface as possible. Further, that locale was in the blind spot of the complexes, so we didn't have to worry about friendly fire. It would also aid in getting the shuttles, evacuating our soldiers, back onto the ship. As insensitive as Sovlin could be, it felt weird standing on the bridge without his jabs.

With our former pursuers dead in the water, our warship beelined toward the moon with a new lease on life. I highlighted the marker of the UN shuttle assigned to our vessel, seeing that it was circling over the evac point. The soldiers would need a few minutes to travel by foot to the pickup site; to my knowledge, the rovers had been left behind and jury-rigged with explosives, in case any Kolshians thought to retake the facilities. Sovlin, Samantha, and Carlos wouldn't return for a little while longer. I tried to focus on picking out long-range targets, knowing that we needed to tilt casualties in our favor. The lasers had struck down thousands of enemies, in the brief span we had them online, but the Kolshians were mobilizing on a bombing route.

We had to push the shadow fleet back, despite how ill-equipped we were. It would be nice if we could rally the Technocracy and UN vessels from the other side of the globe, but they were in hot water. The shadow fleet was pelting them with missiles and plasma, and if the hostiles burned through their munition stores, they would ram themselves into Terran ships. We couldn't replicate that crash and burn strategy, given that we were outnumbered. Back on our side, it would be a sacrificial play, summoning the Duerten Shield and the Sapient Coalition to hound the Kolshians from behind. Still, even though the Dominion had them on their heels, I thought we had to bring them to us.

If the planetary defenses are bombed out, with hardly a chance to rack

up casualties, it's over. We got mowed down like flies taking the complex, so we need an equalizer.

I pinned my ears back against my head. "Tyler…sir. Have comms reach out to the Duerten. I know they won't like orders from us, but persuade them to abandon their positions against the Arxur. We need *something* to hound the shadow fleet from behind."

"The Shield will be massacred, and then the Dominion will come at us too!" Officer Cardona objected.

"I know, but it'll keep them at bay for a few extra minutes. We've invested too much in the planetary defenses. The UN drones took too many losses on our side to get us to the drop point, and we can't handle the shadow fleet alone. The lasers are all we have; it's a simple calculation of what the greatest asset is."

"Fuck. We can't have gone through all of this to lose the lasers, and the Shield *are* gonna fall one-on-one with the Arxur anyway. I'll… have Monahan pass along the message. She'll tell them the truth—that it's the only way—and hope they go for it."

"If you remind them that this is all to stop the shadow fleet from marching on Kalqua, I believe the Duerten will make that sacrifice. They want to bring the Kolshians down, at all costs."

My human friend shuffled off, and I snuck a glimpse at the shuttle's sensor dot near the lunar surface. It was lifting off with our crewmates in tow, assuming all had gone well. Sovlin was a brave Gojid, to pull that death-defying stunt alongside the primates; I couldn't wait to hear some version of how a primitive like me wouldn't have been able to handle a jet pack (ignoring the fact I'd used them during maintenance spacewalks). Regardless of our fleet's dire straits in the battle for the galaxy, some things never changed. If there wasn't some kind of comment about my intellectual capacity, I would be concerned.

My attention returned to the present circumstances on the bridge, where Monahan huddled over her comms. I didn't envy that conversation, but whatever she was saying seemed to be working. The Shield was trying to sidestep the Arxur vessels, who'd moved in for an up-close-and-personal kill. The Sapient Coalition was running interference; as the weakest links, their prey crews still proved selfless, standing in the way of blistering guns. Our plasma weapons could land a few long range shots, but between drone evasion

capabilities and distance, our accuracy was lacking. Watching our side's desperate actions now, I wished I hadn't gotten my hopes up back when early reinforcements entered the system.

"Hey, don't go doom and gloom on me." Tyler tapped his palm against the work station for my attention. "Your spirits look in the toilets, my man, and I won't be having that at my station. Give me one piece of good news, Onso."

"Uh, we're not dead yet?" My tail drooped further between my legs, as I struggled to find a bright side. Reading the shuttle's passenger data, which showed 3 KIAs listed among the dozens of soldiers returning to our ship, meant I couldn't attest to our friends' safety. "Oh, I got one positive. Sovlin, Sam, and Carlos are heading back on the shuttle now…assuming they're alive, we'll see them soon."

"That's fantastic! Y'know, I was worried about sending that Gojid out on somethin' extreme like that. He's really come a long way since we first met him, and I'm glad we got a chance to make everything right between us."

"By making things right, you mean that you punched him in the face."

"Well, I was angry—you gotta know what that's like, Onso. My knuckles may have *grazed* his jaw, but it all worked out. This fight will work out too, so keep your head in the game. I need you to keep watch for the Dominion ships, in case they turn on us. We gotta fight to our last and be ready if the whole damn fleet comes at us."

"Yes, sir. I'll have the Arxur's vectors mapped pronto. It might help to forward any assessments to the SC and the Shield."

Tyler gave me a hearty clap on the back, as I tried not to watch the Shield and Coalition bleed numbers. The Duerten were hurling munitions toward the shadow fleet with fury, forcing some to turn their attention away from our encampment by the moon. The Arxur hadn't relented for a moment, and I could see their ships burning full thrusters ahead in our direction. However, in between my last visual and the present one, it seemed like something had discombobulated them. Their movements looked uncertain and disoriented, like they'd been thrown out of subspace by a disruptor pulse. My inquisitiveness prompted me to solve the puzzle, seeking out what had caused the sudden hesitation.

The majority of the Dominion ships seemed to reach a decision, forging ahead with shaky focus. However, before my watching eyes, an inexplicable breakdown occurred. Some Arxur vessels began firing on their own remnants; other agitated hunter craft turned their sights away from the Duerten, and peppered the shadow fleet from behind. A handful were shooting at both the Shield and Coalition, *and* their own side, blurring their allegiance even further. Any semblance of cohesion broke down with the in-fighting, as no party had a clue where to turn their guns. The Kolshians were taken off-guard by the grays' betrayal, and after a moment of consideration, began shooting all Arxur vessels with blanket condemnation.

"Sir, the Arxur and the Kolshians started shooting at each other… why, I have no clue. Ilthiss said he couldn't get through the comms embargo," I explained. "What I can say is the same chaos is unfolding on the planet's flip side. Our drones seem to be having a resurgence in efficacy."

Tyler's frosty eyes widened. "This changes everything. We have to seize this opportunity, while they're reeling!"

"How do you say it? 'Damn straight.' We need to kick their ass before Sovlin shows up, so he can know we did it all without him."

"I dunno about that. There's still hundreds of thousands of ships to clear out, even if a shit-ton of the ones here were Dominion. How many are on our side? We could have numbers in our favor now."

"It's not so simple, sir, but the Kolshians are treating the Arxur *all* as hostiles. So I'd venture the ones who hadn't turned on their mission will now. My…opinion is that we should target the shadow fleet with everything we have."

"*Damn straight*. Whatever we have left, we'll have it flying at them ASAP!"

True to my conjecture, the Kolshians' targeting of all Arxur vessels resulted in Betterment's entire fleet rounding on them. As the eye-popping number of ships on both sides traded blows, it was clear that the shadow fleet was annihilating the Dominion. While the grays landed thousands of kills through ship volume, their ranks were being ravaged much quicker. The Duerten Shield rallied among the confusion, eagerly shoving antimatter bombs meant for Aafa down the shadow fleet's throat. Any nanodrones and cluster

bombs the UN had left assailed the enemy, capitalizing on the confusion. Planetary defenses had never been contested, thanks to the diversion, and were still cranking out ship-ending lasers without refrain.

I eagerly passed along a target for our plasma railgun, and noted that the indicator denoting Sovlin's transport had crossed into our ship. With the Gojid likely on his way to the bridge, I spared a glance back toward the other side of the globe; there wouldn't be any gaps in my knowledge for him to question. The Yotul Technocracy was being aggressive in hounding the shadow fleet. With the Arxur to distract our foes, particle beams were surgically dissecting them. The Kolshians on that side were floundering enough that the UN could finally divert some drones to help our weaker flank here. We were on the cusp of winning the far half's engagement altogether, which should tilt the lunar fray heavily in our favor.

My mind was reeling after, out of nowhere, it seemed that we *could* end the Federation within the hour. What had changed inside of the Arxur fleet, enough to sow that much division? Had humanity found a way through their cybersecurity, or was something else going on? Dominion vessels were falling in with Ilthiss and Usliff's remnants on the far side, though on this half, their numbers were rapidly sinking toward zero. We needed to keep the pressure up while the shadow fleet's focus was still on the Arxur. The Kolshians had lost not just their allies, but tens of thousands of their own vessels to the betrayal.

Even with our losses earlier, we have the advantage after this change. We have particle beams and planetary defenses still in play, to aid our reinvigorated fleet.

I watched with bated breath, as I wondered if this sudden infusion of chaos would be the deciding factor in the Battle of Aafa. Victory was within humanity's grasp, and now, it was up to us not to let this opportunity slip away.

Chapter 172

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 25, 2137

The lasers from the planetary defenses gave the Kolshians no quarter, as humanity ramped up its efforts against the shadow fleet. While the Arxur were getting eviscerated by the higher quality drones, we took it upon ourselves to direct our allies. The Sapient Coalition, who'd been distracting the Dominion so the Duerten could go after the Commonwealth, joined the avians in whaling on the enemy with everything they had. UN automatons mobilized from beside the moon, while the Federation was preoccupied with the frenzied grays. More of our drones swooped in to reinforce them, coming from the far side of the planet, where our foes' fleet was capsizing.

Dominion ships had fallen in with Ilthiss, and were meandering toward our half of the globe; Yotul Technocracy vessels stationed over there took charge of hunting down the last stragglers. Our warship, meanwhile, fired off plasma shots and every mini-missile we had left, enjoying our cozy spot out of the firing lines. Even as isolated Arxur near our engagement floundered, they were hellbent on issuing parting gifts—that meant every missile or close-range kinetic they could throw against Kolshian metal. No algorithm could escape the quantity of weapons firing all around our enemy. The shadow fleet numbers were ticking down like sand in an hourglass.

I was transfixed by the viewport, as far-reaching particle beams cut through Kolshian vessels with an invisible paw. The Dominion had comprised close to half of the enemy contingent here, so flipping their ship count alone put us on even numerical odds. The planetary defenses were built to tear any invading foes to shreds, which meant they could smite thousands of Aafa's defenders until they were removed from play. The enemy had no chance to take the complexes offline; we were really doing it! I wasn't sure the shadow fleet could fend off the assault even if the UN, the SC, the Technocracy, and the Duerten Shield ships were taken out of the equation.

The Arxur are the miracle reinforcements we needed, here all along. It

wasn't worth the risk of provoking Betterment before, but now was the opportune moment to flip the grays—however humanity achieved that, it was a Ralchisend.

I perked my ears up. "Sir, I'm sure you know, but we should take precautions with our manned vessels. We need as many ships like ours intact as possible to occupy Aafa; it's ideal if this doesn't turn into a two-way bloodbath."

"Right on. I'm going to the ground, *when* we end this fight, to find out what happened to Slanek. I don't know if you want to come with me, but you ain't got to. There's no telling what we're walking into," Tyler replied.

"I wouldn't let you bumble off on your own. After their ordeal, we'll have to see if Sovlin and company are up for another ground excursion; they could be worn out. Might need some shuteye."

"Well, this battle's been ongoing for a lot of fucking hours. We're all tired, but we can rest when the Federation no longer exists as an entity. Any ideas for how we help kill the ones up here, quick and easy?"

I gestured toward the sea of explosions, as the Kolshians were bombarded by thousands of munitions. "I say we sit back and watch the show. Is this what 'fireworks' are like on Earth? I see why you said it's beautiful."

"This is a fine light show, but spectating ain't really seizing the opportunity, Onso. I thought you wanted to make them pay."

"Well, I also want to make it back to Leirn, and see you and all the others on a return flight to Earth. We can still kick their ass from here. It just takes a little imagination."

"I'll bite. What's your play?"

"Remember on the submarine, with the torpedoes…how they went past the enemy and looped back? Why don't we try that with our missiles? With the abundance of stimuli right now, the Kolshian drones might see them as off-target—less warheads would be deflected."

Tyler tapped my screen. "Forward your suggested pathing to weapons. I'll loop everyone into the picture."

Proud of myself for improvising that idea mid-conversation, I began

passing along targeting vectors to weapons. The missiles could have new instructions transmitted to them mid-flight, coordinates I'd have standing by for the humans to send them doubling back. There were still sixty thousand active shadow fleet ships, despite their enormous losses. While that count was much lower than our combined force, we had to take them down before they could land a counter-punch. The flipped Dominion ships were going to be a memory in the next few minutes. That meant we'd bear the enemy's full attention soon, if we couldn't dial up the pressure.

Plus, the racist old Gojid will be back any minute. I don't want him to get a word in, questioning my skills in this station.

It was as if the thought of that former Federation captain summoned him. I could hear the clicking of claws on the floor behind me, the methodical plodding of Sovlin's feet; however, the light strikes of boots belonged to a single pair, and it wasn't the commanding thuds of Carlos' bulky form. Samantha looked unusually dispirited, the standard sneer wiped from her face. The Gojid's haughty air was also missing, replaced by his claws curling into a ball with rage. I drew in a sharp breath, as I put two and two together about what happened on the moon. While I hadn't known Carlos well, he had always been a kind-hearted presence on the bridge.

Tyler's mouth parted with sorrow, as his bushy eyebrows slanted downward. "How bad is it?"

"Carlos isn't coming back," Sovlin said, in a voice that lacked tonality. He squeezed his eyes shut, as if to bury his emotions. "Tell me the planetary defenses made a difference. If we didn't have a chance, our…whole mission was for nothing."

I placed my tail on his wrist for a brief second. "Those lasers killed at least ten thousand of the shadow fleet ships. I'll tell you: revenge, it didn't make me feel as good as I thought it would…but you're wired differently. Turn toward the viewport, and watch the end of the Federation. I came up with a damn good idea for our missiles."

"You have lots of good ideas, Onso. There's no need to prove yourself to anyone."

"Um, who are you and what have you done with Sovlin?"

Samantha's eyes landed on me. "I'll tell you what he won't. Sovlin

agreed not to call you a primitive. He told me he was proud to work alongside such a bright-eyed 'taushana.'"

My tail snapped away from the Gojid's arm. "The fuck did you just say?"

"It was a joke, but it's not funny anymore," the Gojid sighed. "I don't have the heart to mess with you."

"That's not messing with me. That's crossing a fucking line. The only reason I'm not *dropping* you, military law be damned, is because you're suffering from Carlos. You ever say that word again, and I'll rearrange your facial features the way you did to Marcel."

Tyler glowered at Sovlin. "Then I'll throw you into another cabinet for good measure. But I'm gonna cut you some slack, and assume you weren't in your right mind 'cause of what happened to Carlos; it's a damn tragedy. I liked that guy. He had his whole life ahead of him."

"I'm sorry," Samantha grumbled. "I didn't know there was anything wrong with that word."

The Gojid slumped his shoulders. "I just wanted to get under Onso's skin. For what it's worth, I only took the time to even research Leirn culture because I like him."

"That's enough on this topic for now, but you're gonna hear why slurs are real fucked up later," Tyler scolded. "I don't want to spit on Carlos' memory with this bullshit now, 'cause it ain't the right time. Also, I don't wanna miss the shadow fleet getting blown the fuck up for your bullshit. My *best friend's* ideas are gonna wreck those ships!"

If anyone else had called me that charged term for Rinsians, I would've resolved this issue on the spot. However, my opinion was that Sovlin was sincere in viewing it as playful banter, without understanding how it was far beyond acceptable. It was difficult to summon anger when the Gojid looked so devastated by Carlos' demise. I was forced to consider how easy it would be for any one of us to bite the dirt. After losing one of our station's personnel, it drilled home the risk we'd be undertaking landing on Aafa. I tried to shake the thought of our peril, but I knew, now more than ever, that I was responsible to help protect our group. The pledge I'd made to my best friend wasn't one I'd back out on, no matter how

much I'd love to stay up here.

What I did know was that Sovlin and Samantha were committed to see this all the way through as well. While we hadn't asked them, I could tell they intended to head to Aafa's surface with us, as soon as the shadow fleet was eliminated. It was difficult to muster up my old exuberance, following such heavy news, but I did want to burn the Federation's fall into my memory. Years of resentment for the aliens who stole our culture and made a mockery of my species led up to today. Humanity needed one more spike of enemy casualties, and the threat of Kolshian control returning would be gone. The primates' arrival had given us a chance at being our true selves again.

The missiles are away, and sailing wide of their targets. Let's see if the underwater tactics translate…if we can deliver the final punch. I'm ready for this all to be over; I've seen and done too many things that risked my welfare.

The stakes of this moment weren't lost on any of the binocular-eyed faces in the room; the Terrans had endured a great deal, in such a short timeframe. Much like the species who'd suffered under Federation rule for centuries, humanity had their worldview flipped upside-down after first contact. I knew what it felt like to be treated as a primitive, but the burden of being viewed as a monster, unfit to exist, seemed worse. They'd been staring down the potential extinction of their species for many sleepless nights. As the explosives began to snake back toward the shadow fleet, I echoed the Duerten commander's wish that the Earthlings could win *and* find closure.

The enemy seemed mystified by the explosives passing them, as they cleaned up the last of the Arxur. Particle beams were cutting down hundreds of Kolshians, from far-side UN drones closing in on them. The Duerten Shield was flying with senseless aggression, not giving the bastards time to process what the missiles were up to; our armada badgered Commonwealth marks with plasma beams from afar. Lasers scored instant kills from the complexes that Carlos had lost his life to bring into our possession. When thousands of warheads sent from an array of Terran ships doubled back in a flash, the shadow fleet was too overwhelmed to respond.

"Here we go!" Tyler declared, a grin of schadenfreude on his

features. He must've been telling the truth about sharing my desire for payback, back on Leirn. "This is gonna be some flashy fireworks, Onso!"

I was mesmerized alongside the blond-haired human, as explosions rocked the shadow fleet. The hits landed in close succession, encouraging the Sapient Coalition to send follow-up missiles. Debris from the enemy detonations struck their own allies, as thousands of drones crumbled against a new tactic and sensory overload. It was now that the nearest human vessels swept in for the kill, going all-out for the finish. With the numerical advantage on our side, UN automatons found the surest way to eliminate the shadow fleet. They rammed themselves into surviving Kolshian vessels, with guns blazing on approach.

Planetary defenses had their pick of the few remaining survivors, sniping enemies without the need to recharge. Meanwhile, Ilthiss' remaining band had arrived from the other side of the globe; the Arxur chased after the shadow fleet, hungry for revenge after the Kolshians wiped out their comrades on this half. Particle beams were still dissecting enemies, some from Technocracy ships that were hurrying to aid us. My disbelieving eyes stared at the sensor readout, as our flurry of threats made quick work of the few thousand enemies that remained, after the missiles and the UN's own kamikazes. It was difficult to find hostile indicators on the screen.

Control of Aafa is ours, just like that. As long as the Duerten Shield will uphold their bargain about glassing the Kolshians and the Arxur will let us do the "raiding", it's time to start gearing up to head planetbound.

I scrutinized my readout for the decisive moment, and wagged my tail with enthusiasm when it arrived. "The shadow fleet has been eliminated from the orbital vicinity. It's over—humanity has control of the Federation's heart. We won!"

Captain Monahan didn't quiet the cheers and applause, as my shouted announcement reached the ears of the crew. Humans embraced each other, with forward-facing gazes that watered with emotion. Tyler clapped his hand on my back, with a bit too much force. Samantha reached out for her fellow guard, to find he wasn't there; she finally let the tears overflow, while shooting brief glances toward Sovlin. My gaze hardened with resolution, since I knew

what I said wasn't entirely true.

It wasn't over. What came next was uncovering the truth about how the shadow fleet operated, to ensure they weren't hiding out somewhere in space. If we discovered the origins of the conspiracy along the way, that would finally close the case on why the Kolshians were doing this. I didn't care what their reasons were, but humanity did; Tyler mentioned something about recording history to avoid it happening again in the future. Assuming we were able to land safely, the United Nations still had to reckon with the fate of Aafa…and the entire galaxy.

Tyler pursed his lips, once the celebrations settled down. "Alright, we ain't breakin' out the champagne yet. Anyone who's heading to the surface, follow me to the hangar. We'll get a briefing there on everything we need to know, and any intel on the shadow caste that might help, then we're going. No time like the present. Everyone else, watch out for enemy stragglers and reinforcements. Intel says that was all the ships they had, but we can't afford to get blindsided. Now who's with me?"

"I'm coming with you," Sovlin said.

Samantha bobbed her shoulders. "I haven't shot enough Kolshians for what happened out there. Let's go."

"Glad we're all sticking together. Let's just be careful for any spiteful traps they set for us down there," I growled.

Tyler bared his teeth. "Yep, the way I heard it, all human soldiers will be wearing gas masks. I'm a red meat guy—don't want to be cured."

"Red meat?" Sovlin wrinkled his nose with utter disgust, a trace of his normal attitude surfacing. "You mean, blood-soaked?"

"Nah, I'm talking about the color of their flesh, my dude!"

"Which is determined by how much oxygen is held in the muscles," I added, with a tail lash of mischief.

The Gojid flailed his claws. "Why the fuck do you know that?! *I* didn't need to think about that, Onso! I mean, Protector, are you getting a doctorate in predation?"

"I know many things. You'd be amazed what reading actual words on paper can teach you."

Tyler smirked. “Something tells me Sovlin doesn’t want knowledge about our culture. Why don’t we resume the discussion about meat eating on the ride down?”

“I’d rather not,” Sovlin spat. “Just walk, *predator*.”

My exchange partner snickered to himself; it was clear that our orbital victory had lifted everyone’s spirits, except for the sullenly silent Sam. We needed to find a new normal without Carlos, so we could achieve success on our mission. As I marched toward the hangar bay, I considered how our stint on Aafa might play out. Humanity was likely taking its first actions as the default leaders of the galaxy. While I was grateful for how differently they treated aliens from the Federation, I hoped that they would continue to uphold a moral example in this new future.

Chapter 173

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 25, 2137

Aside from my visit following the Battle of Earth, I hadn't been to the Kolshian homeworld in a long time. Recel used to invite me to family celebrations, when he'd return home and pass along his stories from the war front. On occasion, I accepted my protégé's offer to mingle with his family. I hadn't been interested in reminders of my nonexistent loved ones, by seeing his happiness with his relatives, so it had been years since I wandered this city. The UN transport touched down on a rooftop landing pad, and I could see that time hadn't changed the Federation capital much. Massive arrangements of flowers were maintained atop buildings, with the more complex artwork denoting prestige.

Botany was viewed as the most peaceful, preylike pastime, but this was the sole planet where it was a lucrative career. There was no architecture with as many adornments as the School of the Flora, which took in students from across the galaxy. Each building had its own color scheme, with words spelled out in Kolshian and pretentious Common engravings. It crossed my mind that even the name of the diplomats' tongue stemmed from the word Commonwealth, showing who was really in charge. Yet for centuries, no race had realized who the Federation served. With the full scale of what had been taken from Gojidkind, the skyline that once inspired me with awe and purpose smelled rotten.

While a masked Tyler and Samantha were enamored by the view from on high, I didn't want to waste a second sightseeing. There was still work to do, ensuring that the secret caste ended today; I couldn't return to Earth, where Hunter and Vysith needed my guidance, until the mission was seen to completion. I hadn't even allowed myself to think of the future until victory was ours. I could act as a *father* again. It blew my mind that we'd defeated the shadow fleet, and that subservient species could reclaim power in our own lives. Aafa was at humanity's mercy, and I hoped the predators would use that power to sniff out any other secrets the conspiracy had.

“Let’s get moving,” I grumbled. “Remind me why we landed on the roofs, not the streets?”

Tyler heaved a sigh. “You know why. There’s no telling how the Kolshians will react to *predators* touching down in their grill. Last thing we need is to get caught up in a stampede, or to get mobbed or shot at. For all we know, there’s shadow caste agents lying in wait to gun us down.”

“I feel like there was something in that last thought. Maybe someone saw us landing here, and standing here admiring the view is painting a target on our backs?”

“Baldy’s right,” Onso chimed in. My claws angled toward him in a threatening gesture, due to the use of that nickname. “Sooner we find out what happened to Slanek and get out of here, the better.”

Samantha leaned back on her heels. “We need a way down to the surface.”

“Well, I can see the whole city, while I’m ‘admiring the view.’ The crowds are over by the Federation hall, along with some shit burning. Means we’re clear to head on down. I say we take the elevator and walk out the front door,” Tyler growled.

The female human shrugged. “Beats listening to Baldy screaming in my ear, rappelling down the side of the skyscraper. I’m not sure what our plan is to flush out the shadow caste, but I’m glad another team’s responsible for seizing the governance hall.”

“That’s where I’m useful. I’ve been here several times, and I know the basic layout,” I chimed in. “Some civilian might talk to me about who’s involved with seditious activity. That’s our best bet to get any insider info.”

Tyler nodded in agreement with my plan, before we hurried down the rooftop access. The skyscraper, which appeared to have been a hedge fund management venture, was all but vacant; pooling the resources of wealthy investors didn’t seem to be a priority, with predator ships in orbital control. Electricity hadn’t been cut off, so the four of us squeezed into the elevator. I shouldered my rifle, ready for any threats when we reached the lobby. There was nobody to greet us when the doors swung open at the ground floor. Even the dumbest Kolshian knew that camping out in a towering building wasn’t ideal if antimatter bombs hit.

While I said I might be able to get Kolshians to talk to us, that might be more difficult than it seems with the humans here. I remember how Recel shuddered when he first saw Marcel.

The reason seeking out information would be a struggle became evident, once someone saw our group hustling out onto the streets. A single scream from a passerby, followed by pointing at us with an indigo tentacle, caused anyone walking nearby to scatter. I contemplated where the Kolshians wouldn't be able to run, which left anyone who stayed in their residences. After taking a moment to catch my bearings, I led the humans toward the setting sun. Our posse traipsed down the eerie sidewalk; I knew we were forced to barge into someone's home and intimidate them. All we sought was a small pointer in the right direction, for anyone who *might* talk to us willingly.

"Where is the shadow caste? They're not resisting our invasion at all?" Onso mused aloud, as we maneuvered through the walkable city.

Samantha snickered. "I think they're more preoccupied with keeping their own citizens at bay. The stunts they pulled today couldn't have been popular…plus, they lost to us."

"We'll see how the average Kolshian feels about their government and conspiracy, if we can get someone to have a conversation with us," I mumbled. "But first, I need you two to act predatory. Nobody's crawling out of the woodwork to speak with us, so we need to bust into someone's home and get some pointers."

"What? You want us to go and intimidate people?" Tyler stiffened, as he noticed the row of compact houses, which looked like oversized storage crates. "Fucking hell. How are ya sure there even *is* anyone left alive who stood against the government, before all this?"

"Because I knew Recel wouldn't have stood for the things we've learned about the Commonwealth. He wasn't the only Kolshian with integrity, who would've been revolted by this tyranny. I just imagine the smart ones operated in secrecy, like the shadow caste they're opposing."

"You better be right, Sovlin, or we're wasting precious time they could be using to *tie up loose ends*."

“What happens to Slanek doesn’t hinge on my plan. You have no alternative ideas for where to start the search, and no intel on the shadow caste’s location. Are you in, or are you out?”

Tyler hesitated. “You sure have wonderful ways of speaking to your commanding officer, but you’re right that we ain’t got nothing on these guys. They’re ghosts. The civvies are likely as anyone to have theories. Maybe the Kolshians got an Area 51 place.”

“A what?” Onso questioned.

“Secret base that everyone guesses what the government’s doing there. Even if it’s under the ocean like their nukes, that’s way too big a search area. We gotta narrow it down, so tell me what door we’re kicking down.”

I searched for the house with the nicest garden, and trundled up that doorstep. The humans followed, before Tyler’s leg removed the barrier from its hinges with a powerful kick. The Terran soldiers stormed forward, sweeping the house with guns out. They found a whimpering Kolshian beneath her kitchen table, and dragged her out screaming. Samantha jabbed her barrel right beneath the civilian’s chin, shushing her threateningly. Officer Cardona seemed to be keeping an eye on the guard, though he didn’t voice our disunity.

We picked someone who won’t be willing to go toe-to-toe with human aggression. I’m sure she’ll answer our questions, under threat of having her brains blown out.

“Do you want us gone?” Tyler barked, in the most guttural tone he could muster.

The Kolshian froze, with two gun-toting predators hovering over her. “Please leave. I’m…n-not good food.”

“We don’t want to eat you, dipshit. We’re asking you to talk,” Samantha growled. “You play nice and answer the Gojid’s questions, you don’t have to see us anymore. You don’t sing, we shoot you and find someone else that will. What will it be?”

“I’ll help! P-please, just ask and leave. Whatever you need!”

“Not so fast. You play games with us, or we find out you’ve been in *any* way untruthful, then we come back. You’ll *wish* we killed you upfront, so think carefully about how you answer. Also remember that we’re predators, so we’re a lot better at deception than you are.

Isn't that right?"

"Yes! W-what is it you want to know?"

I ambled up to the Kolshian, as she quivered on the floor. "It's an easy question. Do you know anyone who's involved with seditious activity against the Kolshian regime? Anyone suspected of treason, disloyalty, human sympathizing, or something in that vein?"

"I…I'm not involved with that s-sort of thing. Wait!" the civilian exclaimed, as Samantha twisted the gun. "Look, I only know of one p-person who's under serious suspicion: the sister of a hated Kolshian traitor. S-she's been, um, ostracized, since nobody knows how deep her involvement goes. Maybe her?"

Tyler leaned forward. "Where is this suspect?"

"She lives two blocks down…just go right when you exit my place. It's the bungalow with the vine braids, flowing from her window sill. You can't miss it! Is that all?"

"Yes," I grunted.

"…are you going to k-kill me?"

Samantha stepped back with the gun, though I could sense her scowl. "No. Time to go, guys. I've heard enough pathetic pleas for one day."

I turned on my heel, ignoring the stare of an abnormally quiet Onso. That Yotul must've sensed my own doubt creeping in; he was thinking, just as I was, that the Kolshian's rumor seemed like shallow guidance to act on. I hoped this lead would bear fruit, but our sweep could turn into a long search. Familial relations to a traitor didn't mean this suspect agreed with his ideas, or was involved with resisting her government. However, she might know which players her brother had been connected to, so we could question those people with her help. It merited investigation, even her partiality to us wasn't certain.

Let's hope Sam is clear that we're not going in to intimidate thisKolshian. We need our potential ally to like us.

We couldn't seek out the shadow caste without proper information. I kept my complaints about the ceaseless walking to myself, and instead led the way toward the suspected rebel's home. The single-story home was classier than the cramped dwelling we'd broken

into; the last stop's size had facilitated an easy sweep, for our initial interrogation. As promised, thick vines flowed in artificial entanglements from each window. Faint recognition chimed in my head, as I gazed at the peach stucco and manicured teal lawn. Was this somewhere that I had visited long ago? I hadn't associated with many people on this planet.

"This seems familiar," I mumbled.

Onso tilted his head. "It's familiar because of the lawn. That quaint shade of turquoise matches the grass species indigenous to Skalga. That must've been imported from off-world. The owner takes botany seriously, to spend that many credits on—"

"Not that. It's like this *place* is tickling my memory."

Samantha crossed her arms. "If you say it came to you in a dream, I'm going to backhand you."

"Maybe it's nothing, but it's not like every building on Aafa looks alike. Anyway, we shouldn't be wasting time. I'll knock, since we don't want her seeing you two first."

"Fine. We'll stand off in the corner in *timeout*."

Onso perked his ears up, before trotting up to the doorstep ahead of me. "And I'll talk to this Kolshian about interesting flora and their evolutionary quirks! We're going to hit it off if I have any say."

I hustled after him, rapping my claws against the frame. "You'll do no such thing. We don't need a babbling primitive scaring her—"

The door swung open seconds after I knocked, suggesting the inhabitant saw us coming. The Kolshian's skin was a light purple, with features that I would recognize even after a decade. Her demeanor was sheepish, but her posture shifted once she focused on me. Her bulbous eyes widened with recognition, emotions swirling within. I stared at her in shock, feeling the buried guilt for my treatment of Marcel return. That answered who her "traitorous" brother was; my heart broke to know my first officer's name was being dragged through the mud.

The Yotul squinted with puzzlement, as I threw myself forward and wrapped Aucel in a hug. "Oh, so you're *friends* with this Kolshian?"

Sam shuffled into view, huffing. "I'm thinking the same thing. Whose side are you on, Sovlin?"

“Right, it’s…fine. I saw the p-predators on your approach; I knew they were here,” Aucel stammered, as she avoided looking at the Terrans. “I, um, have many questions for you, Sovlin. The first of which is why you’re with them.”

“Because they’re good people who deserve support. They’re trying to repair the galaxy, and I trust them with that responsibility. Besides that, I owe them,” I grumbled. “I should’ve protected Recel, Aucy, and I’m sorry.”

Tyler inched forward, tilting his head. “Real talk. Why are you so familiar with a Kolshian?”

“This is *Recel’s* sister, Tyler. You know, my first officer: the one who saved Marcel?”

“No shit? Well I’ll be damned!” The tall human’s body language warmed in an instant, abandoning his stand-offish posture. “Marcel would love to talk to you, but for now, we’ll take care of you. I ain’t forgot how much humanity owes Recel; Gojids mighta wiped us out if not for him. That makes you one of us. Your name’s ‘Aucy?’”

Aucel shifted with discomfort, clasping her tentacles together. “Um, my name is Aucel. You…don’t hate me?”

“Why would I? ’Cause you were born a Kolshian? That’s as dumb as folks hating us ’cause our eyes are different. We’re here for the shadow caste.”

“I’m…not their biggest fan. Please, come in; I don’t want anyone seeing you talking to me.”

Aucel shied away, as the humans padded into the residence. Onso and I tailed behind, inspecting the interior’s photographs and plants. My personal connection to this Kolshian likely helped her to accept that the Terrans weren’t an immediate threat. There was no telling what she knew about the conspiratorial government, but I was pleased that she expressed distaste. It was also reassuring that Tyler spoke as if she was a friend, because I *couldn’t* leave her to face whatever consequences were coming. I owed it to Recel to get her off this world, safely, with Duerten antimatter hanging over Aafa.

One problem. If I’m not mistaken, Aucel looks outright disgusted by the predators. I’m not sure she actually wanted to invite them inside, or would want *to stick with us, even with a guarantee of protection.*

Oblivious Tyler made himself at home, slouching in a kitchen chair. “Right then. I’ll get to the point. Is it true you’re working against the Kolshian government?”

“Who told you that?” Aucel hissed.

“It’s why we’re here. We asked around, and were told that your brother…that Recel was a traitor, and you might be too.”

“Again, slandering Recel’s name?! Um, forgive me for raising my voice. I’m not challenging you.”

I heaved a sigh. “Aucy, the humans aren’t going to go off at a single insult. Believe it or not, they’re immensely patient. I’ve challenged their wishes directly, even argued in bad faith, and nothing happened. They don’t experience bloodlust.”

“My anger issues are much worse than Tyler’s,” Onso added. “Humans are soft. I was in the process of scientifically verifying that you can manipulate them just by adopting a ‘cute’ expression.”

“If you want to be treated like a child,” Officer Cardona growled. “Look, Aucel, we’re trying to figure out where the shadow fleet’s been hiding all these years. We were looking for someone who already wanted to take them down, and has a head start searching. Given that I heard you say you don’t like ’em, we’re on the same side.”

“No, we’re not! I haven’t lifted a tentacle against the government!” the Kolshian protested. “People spoke out after learning about the omnivores, and *every* one of them disappeared within a day. Our leaders scare me almost as much as you do. I know they don’t have our best interests at heart, and they’ll do things like sacrificing evac shuttles…but what could I do? I didn’t want to end up like Recel. Everyone hates my race, so I can’t leave.”

I wrapped my arm around Aucel’s shoulders, as tears streamed down her face. “Easy. I understand what it’s like to be viewed as a monster…maybe even to view *yourself* as a monster. So do the humans. Just because you didn’t want to be killed doesn’t mean you supported the shadow caste.”

“But I’m not with humanity! I don’t like or trust predators, and I’m certainly not pleased they’ve taken over my planet. Recel told me to trust humans, just like you did, Sovlin, but I hoped *never* to interact with them. Whatever you say about bloodlust, they’re built for

killing. The same way a flower is coded to bloom. So don't think I'll overlook their cursed lifestyle—I won't serve you, humans. If you need to kill me for that, get it over with."

Samantha had turned her back on the conversation, struggling to withhold her comments. Onso had drifted to her side, since the Yotul's skill was in intellect rather than nurturing. I had already said my piece on humanity's kindness, to no avail. That left a stupefied Tyler, who rose from his chair in slow increments. The human sank to one knee in front of Aucel, rather than remaining at his full height. The Kolshian gasped as the predator pulled her into a gentle hug, despite the insults she'd lobbed at his species. If this display of empathy didn't convince her, nothing would.

Tyler pulled away, bowing his head. "I'm disappointed to hear those thoughts, but thanks for your honesty. I'm sorry that we frighten you so much, but we won't kill you. Pinky promise. You ain't got to do nothing you don't want, or to like us. I mean, I wanted aliens to like me, but I guess it's hard when my *lifestyle* disgusts you. What I need is to remind you we both don't like the shadow fleet, so having 'em gone helps us all."

"Plus, if we wanted to kill everyone on Aafa, we could've glassed you," Sam commented.

"She's right. But it's not up to us to decide what parts of nature, what lifeforms, and which lifestyles are acceptable. We believe the galaxy has seen too much death and suffering. We wish we all coulda got along. Even if you don't believe those words from a predator, the shadow caste can't go through the motions of *pretending* to care. Doesn't that prove we're less bad than them?"

Aucel was silent for several seconds, before she forced herself to gaze at the human. "I…I thought about reaching out to Earth before, but I knew you couldn't help me. You're dangerous. I must be out of my mind to be considering this. But the shadow fleet *are* predators too, so I guess I'm just selling them to their own kind."

"You know where they're hiding?" I gasped.

"I…I have a guess. The shadow caste always hides in plain sight, and their self-selected name is about hiding beneath the official government. What if it's literal? Where's a better place to camp under our noses than beneath the Federation's hall? There must be a reason the capital won't authorize construction of new bunkers, or

anything underground."

"That…actually makes sense," Sam acknowledged, with a lilt of surprise.

I flicked my claws in agreement. "The hall is built like a fucking maze. Perfect for hiding corridors or rooms."

"Ain't certain, but it's worth looking. Thanks, Aucel," Tyler growled. "Join us. I know how you feel about humans, but you don't *really* think Recel was all wrong. We can help you start over. Also, if we find the shadow caste, you can see the truth with your own eyes. You'll know that they are the enemy of all sapient life, not us."

The Kolshian shuddered. "I'll join you, in case you need more insight about Aafa. It's for the best to see that those monsters are taken out. Besides, it's not really a choice. If the shadow caste hangs around, and they find out I helped you, I'm dead."

"That won't happen under our watch…and, you have my word, we'll make sure Recel's name isn't tarnished any longer. He had compassion for one of ours, and it cost him everything. I only hope that I can show half of the same kindness with you. Welcome to our family."

Onso wagged his tail. "Welcome! I'll get in contact with UN command on the way. Let's go send those shadow pricks to an early grave!"

Samantha raised her gun in agreement. "C'mon. You heard the Yotul."

I coaxed Aucel out the door, grateful that I could achieve some penance for Recel's demise. His relatives were the closest thing I had to surviving family, apart from Hunter. I hoped our theory about the shadow caste's location was correct, and that it correlated with where Slanek had been taken. Beyond rescuing that Venlil, we deserved the truth about why the Kolshians had set forth to rid the galaxy of predators. After everything we'd endured to get here, I was confident our team could face these final revelations together. It felt right for humanity to bring down the Federation's secrets on the same day their empire crumbled.

Chapter 174

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 26, 2137

United Nations soldiers were amassing by the governance hall, the very building where every Federation diplomat once gathered. If the shadow caste's hideout was in that intricate construction, I could almost respect the brazenness to keep the secretive underbelly so close to every other race. There was a wondrous arrogance to it, the very trait that made the Kolshians underestimate humanity, until they no longer had the chance to wipe Earth out. They always assumed they were untouchable and would handily win the war, until the moment Aafa was ours.

While the Terrans were still calculating their moves, Kolshian civilians had stormed the hall, and fires danced precariously close to the building. Since the United Nations needed the information within, we were in the process of quelling blazes. The crowd had been incensed by their government throwing away evacuation shuttles, and also that they'd lost to the predator invaders. Once we'd assessed the situation, Tyler had found us a group of human soldiers to storm the hall with. I wasn't sure where we were going, but we needed one of the native guards to help us.

Even the Kolshians responsible for protecting this place seem to have turned on their government; I don't think they're in on the shadow caste's locale. I've advised Tyler we need a different way of asking.

My gaze monitored Aucel, a Kolshian who seemed none too fond of us; while I didn't like her mingling with our posse, I could respect that she had a brain in her skull. If she was right about the shadow caste being buried belowground, it would make our mission much smoother. My main concern was that, should she end up representing a problem for us, I didn't trust Sovlin's loyalties. The Gojid wouldn't turn on humanity, but I doubted he was capable of pulling the trigger on Recel's sister either. This could be a trap set for us by the secret government, luring us into a place where they held the cards.

"I'll assume we won't just find a floor plan lying around, huh?" Samantha asked.

The Gojid hovered close to Aucel, as we moved toward the door. “I’ve been to the basement. Your head’ll spin trying to get there, through all sorts of twisting corridors, and finally down an escalator. They have a subway train that takes you from the hall to the office spaces. I didn’t see anything related to the shadow caste back then, so…”

“It’s alright. Nikonus *must* have had some sort of bunker, where he’d go if there was an attempt on his life. Idiot might’ve not expected an assassination, but he ain’t so dumb to not have plans for it,” Tyler explained. “We just gotta ask the guards if they know where Nikky went in an emergency. Private bunker or some shit.”

Aucel gulped with nervousness. “What are you g-going to do about the civilians who’ve pushed their way inside?”

“They don’t bother us, we don’t bother them. They wanna attack us, we have to defend ourselves, but hopefully, they know we’re here for the shadow caste. If the bullets start flying, ya better duck for cover, ‘cause I sure ain’t givin’ you a weapon. That blue helmet tells our boys you’re with us. Coolio?”

“Uh…I don’t feel good about being here, with a bunch of…p-predators with guns.”

I bared my teeth with exasperation. “Have those *predators* shot at you, with said weapons? Sovlin, your friend, vouched that humans won’t snap. We’ve lived on a warship with them for months, during life-or-death battles. Stay behind if you want to, Aucel, but we don’t have time to tip-claw around your feelings.”

“I want to see what the shadow caste has been doing, while we all live up here. I want to know why they care so little about the lives of their own people, and why they lied to us. You’re here on my planet now, so I doubt there’s any avoiding humans anyway.”

“After everything your people are responsible for, I think it’s high time you stop treating us like the fucking monsters,” Sam grumbled.

Sovlin’s spines were bristling beneath his vest. “Aucel can’t help how she feels, and she’s not responsible for what the Kolshians did! It took me a long time not to be afraid around humans. It’s not easy to see you as normal.”

“You always act like it’s been so easy for us, Baldy! We said hello and everyone tried to wipe us out—over a billion dead. Everyone’s

lost something, but you don't see humans cowering around every alien they see."

"That's enough!" Tyler spat. "I understand that you're angry at Kolshians, but Sovlin is right. Aucel had no say in what her government did. She can't help the feelings she's been programmed to have, and she deserves as much patience as we gave any other xeno. I know it ain't easy, Sam, 'specially after Carlos, but he'd be the first one to warn you about lumping an entire populace together."

The Gojid mimicked a human nod. "'The belief that makes monsters of us all.' He was talking about not seeing your enemies as people. Carlos never wavered in that belief. I don't intend to let you *or* Aucel make my mistakes."

"And I don't intend to let us get saddled with someone who'll get in the way of our mission," I countered. "This is way more important than what you owe Recel. This is a favor for *Marcel*, and also the answers for why all of his, and our, torment happened. If Aucel can't control her feelings, then she's not coming with us."

Aucel wrapped her tentacles around her torso in a self-soothing gesture. "I'll be fine. They killed my brother, and what they did is the reason the…'predators with guns' are here in the first place. If you have a chance to get rid of them and expose their real motives, I won't be in your way. I just wish we'd get it over with."

Is this as simple as facilitating revenge for her brother's murder? I still don't trust her not to be a liability, but she doesn't seem like a shadow caste plant. I know how I felt, just seeing my hensa burned by those exterminators.

I could recall the aliens' truck arriving at my family home, and Papa shooting the hensa for a quick death. Why couldn't the exterminators give predators a swift, painless end, if they had to kill our beloved pets? Thinking about the look in our domesticated pest-killer's eyes, I could imagine her tan-and-black pelt vanishing beneath tongues of flames. The fact that Dino's coloration had been the exact same dug up all my memories, the moment I first encountered a Terran dog. Imagining what had been done to our beloved animals made me furious, just as much as thoughts of the Farsul who'd placed me on predator disease medication.

My claws curled up with fury, as the slights against the Yotul

swirled in my mind. The glassing of Caato hadn't made me feel any better, but it hadn't eased my loathing of the Kolshians either. If I were honest, I hated having to work alongside someone who'd lived a comfortable life on Aafa; by her own words, Aucel hadn't played an active role against the shadow caste. That made her complicit, as soon as she'd known the truth about her government. I was here to fulfill Tyler's promise to search for Slanek, not for the secrets humanity sought. Whatever reason the Commonwealth gave for *why* this needed to happen, it wouldn't suffice. I couldn't care less.

Tyler placed a hand on my shoulder, making me jump. "Onso! Did you hear me? We're moving, and I need your genius mind workin' for us. You good, bro?"

"I'm fine. I was just remembering the day they burned my hensa," I admitted. "Hearing the Kolshians *justify* what they've done; I'm not sure I want to be in the room for that."

"Honestly, I ain't sure I can deal with their contempt for us neither. You don't gotta hear it firsthand, my man. Don't think I don't know you came here for me, and I appreciate it. Let's see if the shadow caste's there, alright?"

I lifted my rifle in acknowledgment, and bounded after the UN soldiers. We pushed our way through the thronging crowd, scaring them back by popping a few rounds into the ground. That proved an expedient way to clear a path, as we moved into the front door. We spotted a Kolshian in guard's armor, who seemed to be helping the rebels milling about in the ornate entryway. Towering pictures of species working together on legislation mocked me from the walls, the false promise of the Federation put in visual form. I tried not to focus on the amicable body language of diplomats past and present, and instead watched Tyler round on the guard.

The blond human's impatient eyes could be felt beneath his biohazard mask. "Do you know where Nikonus' bunker…safe room, whatever ya wanna call it…where that is? Where he'd hide if shit hits the fan?"

Ah, Tyler. Ever so eloquent.

"Um, yes. I do," the Kolshian gasped out.

"Then you'll show us there. We'd like to pay your leader a visit."

"Okay, but Chief Maronis' bunker is sealed. Even us guards don't

have high enough clearance to give you access…"

Samantha raised an explosive charge. "Don't worry. I have a key."

Tyler leveled his weapon at the local guard, who wisely took the hint to get moving. The path through the entrance hall had been walked by many diplomats, though protestors had taken to smashing anything that looked fragile. Unlike the one at our behest now, the few defenders of Aafa who *resisted* the mob had been overrun; they were in the custody of furious Kolshian civilians. Most rebels paid little mind to the hundreds of UN soldiers, swarming in the direction of this "Maronis" fellow's bunker. The largest group of dissidents had filtered into the now-vacated auditorium, where Noah had given his speech not too long ago. It felt like another lifetime, but none of the Commonwealth's henchmen showed their faces there today.

The shadow caste has gone into hiding, it's quite clear. They think they can stay off the radar, and regroup, but we won't let that happen.

A handful of protestors did scatter in fright at the sight of us, but those who'd quietly sympathized with humanity fell in behind our troops. They must've figured that we were seeking out the shadow caste, who definitely lacked the backing of their citizenry right now. Sovlin was right about the hall being built in a disorienting maze; unless you treaded these paths every day, an escort was needed to find any particular destination outside the auditorium. Tyler questioned whether the guard was misleading us, before the Gojid piped up that it was, in fact, a meandering maze. Aucel was taking in the sights we passed in silence, and seemed to be considering whether to shrink back into the crowd of Kolshian followers. I wouldn't mind dropping her off with her kind.

Before Recel's sister could act on that thought, the guard we were tailing steered us toward an escalator. Sovlin's eyes lit up with recognition, which was a good sign we were getting somewhere. There was an unspeakable awkwardness in hundreds of Terran soldiers, having to walk down the moving stairway in a single file line. Per Tyler's directives, Sam and I each perched on a rolling railing, with Sovlin in front of the large Terran on a step, so that four guns pointed at any traps below. Aucel stuck right behind us; she did look as curious as I felt to see whether her theory was true. I was excited by the prospect of bringing this mission to a close, and

ensuring that the Kolshians' legacy of destruction came to a close.

The Kolshian guard pointed away from a subway train, walked to his indicated spot, and popped out a false wall. "Down another few flights of stairs, you'll hit a blast door. I'm not sure your explosives are a big enough…*key*. You need to pass a retinal scan with authorization, and use today's code; I don't have either of those. Regardless, if Maronis is there, nobody will be allowed in or out."

"So it's kept shut by a powered switch? Obviously, we just need to cut the power to the door," I pointed out. "Do we have any EMP grenades?"

Tyler grunted with contentment. "The range of those bad boys is short, but we sure do. We'll scan through the walls to find where the switch is, and light it up!"

"Okay. Hang on," Aucel piped up. "How do you know where to find Chief Maronis, or what's waiting inside?"

"Well, we don't, but I'm gonna find someone who does. Let the specialists do their business, and we'll see if what's back there's *really* a bunker."

A human soldier searched for the exact location of the switch, before attaching an EMP grenade nearby. She gestured for anyone with electronic devices to step back, to keep them from getting fried, then triggered the device. Like its jaws had been pried open, the mechanism sealing the blast doors released its grip. The thick barriers slid open in slow fashion, and uncorked the mysterious construction behind. Aucel's eyes widened with shock, as she glimpsed the scale of cavernous space behind the entryway. Her theory about the shadow caste's location was spot on.

The door hadn't concealed entry to the head-of-state's bunker; a city stretched as far as the eye could see, with rounded, cavelike edges above rather than a natural sky. Plants had been set up in pathways, between multi-story modules and miles-long spaceship hangars. Lights hovered above the greenery to aid its growth, simulating sunlight and illuminating the cavern. Thousands of Kolshians milled about the streets, with some flocking to shops. There were a few armed sentries posted by the opened doors, though none drew their weapons on us. The Terrans were quick to disarm them, and line them up by the doors.

I could appreciate the impressive feat of engineering, to carve out an expansive settlement down here. It answered numerous questions about how the conspiracy sourced its perpetrators, and where their advanced fleet had been stashed for all of these centuries. I believed fully that, despite the negligible effort to send average civilians to bunkers, Commonwealth leadership had hidden here in the face of our invasion. It was in line with their standard selfishness and disregard for lives.

Just wait until the Kolshian protestors waltz inside, behind the humans, and see how an entire society was kept from them. We're going to make someone point us to Chief Maronis!

"Where is Maronis?" Tyler barked, leaning close enough that his breath struck a sentry's cheeks. "I think he should discuss the terms of your surrender."

The shadow fleet thug gulped. "Chief Maronis…thought you might find us. Don't worry, he didn't run! He wanted to parlay, and told us to send you to him. The five-story building painted the color of seagrasses, straight to your right—it's the true office of the Chiefs. A short walk from the hall."

I pinned my ears back. "How do we know this isn't a trick?! You don't fight fair."

"Because it's over. This is the only chance our work will be maintained, for the continuance of all life, and Maronis gambled that maybe you could understand. We know you want answers, so hear it from the top. Let us spell out our proof that you will kill *all* of your friends, whether you mean to or not."

Tyler hesitated, before stepping back from the Kolshian. "Lead us to him. Try anything and you can forget any mercy. You can forget keeping your life."

As Samantha, Aucel, and Sovlin followed after Tyler, I found myself hanging around by a stationary group of UN soldiers. I didn't want to hear the root of the Kolshians' propaganda, explaining why humanity would snap and wipe out their sapient allies. What was the point of entertaining such wild delusions—especially when this could easily be a trap? I'd meant to stick with my exchange partner the whole way, but he said he wouldn't force me to listen to Federation bullshit. I could watch his back from out here, searching for signs of shadow fleet treachery. When the time came to search

for Slanek, I would be there to help my human friend fulfill his promise.

I cleared my throat for attention. “You go on ahead. I’ll wait out here. If anything smells off, get out of there.”

Tyler glanced over his shoulder, before giving a curt nod. “I hate separating from ya, but I respect you takin’ care of yourself. Don’t worry. We’ll see ya on the flip side, Onso.”

I flicked my ears in acknowledgement, and watched as Kolshian protestors tailed his contingent of Terran soldiers; those answers meant a lot more to that posse than they did to me. All I cared about was protecting Leirn and my friends. A sliver of me was curious what justification the shadow caste thought humanity would care about, but it would be delusional ravings if they truly thought Earth would carry on their work. I rested back on my heels about a grueling day’s exploration, and committed to a diligent watch outside the building where Maronis was supposed to be waiting.

As long as humanity found the closure they were looking for, perhaps this wouldn’t be an entirely wasted endeavor.

Chapter 175

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: March 26, 2137

The captured Kolshian sentry led us up several flights of stairs, after the UN soldiers rejected taking the elevator, and I waited with unease for a trap to show itself. There was only a modest room where an elderly Kolshian, with baby blue skin and a pompous air about him, waited. The figure claiming to be Maronis gestured to the seats, an offer Tyler accepted after some hesitation. I plopped down next to the blond human, while a skeptical-looking Aucel found a chair next to me. Onlookers from the UN and Kolshian dissenters packed into the room, ready to bring the Commonwealth leader into custody. Would he be wise enough to surrender?

Maronis leaned forward. “Well, humans, before you say a word, let me answer the obvious question. I’m Chief Maronis, the successor to Nikonus, but unlike him, I don’t paint a target on my back. I’ve tried to operate from the shadows, and everything I’ve done has been to crush dissent and ensure the continuance of our work. I don’t know if *your kind* can understand, but you simply must.”

“I understand you’ve built quite the underground city here. How many residents?” Tyler prompted.

“Millions in this city alone. This is the…shadow capital, a mirror to what you see aboveground, but there are other residences beneath our cities with separate entrances; you could find your way to one of them by bullet train. Much of our space was devoted toward the shadow fleet, before your breed destroyed it. I don’t know what I hope for from this conversation. I believe you do care about your *friends,* so maybe if you realize that you’re exposing them to tremendous harm, you’ll do the right thing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll explain everything. I can see several of my own citizens are curious to find out why we needed to protect them from predators. Let me start by directing a question at your off-world Gojid friend. Captain Sovlin, how would you feel, knowing you and any other herbivore who’s interacted with humans could wither from the

inside out? That your mental faculties could vanish in an instant, *years later*?"

I waved my claws dismissively. "I'd feel nothing, because it's not true. Predator contamination is a lie, Maronis. Everything the Federation taught is wrong; the humans aren't a disease."

"Don't sound so convinced. You came here to ask why we began taking action against predators. I intend to tell you the full story, and after I do, we'll see if you still want to be sitting right next to one of those things. A disease is *precisely* what they are, and I'll lay out a scientific accounting for why that is true. You cannot argue with a mountain of evidence."

"Not unless you're the Federation," Samanatha sneered. "Did some animal rot after it died, and you're convinced it's tainted?"

"No. It was much worse than that. The Kolshian race was placed in immense peril, by the filth that festers in a predator's fluids. And in the humans' defense…I don't think they realize what they're doing."

Was Maronis really trying to sell this tired argument of predator exposure giving us predator disease? Terran therapists had shown that mental conditions were more complex, as were the actual neurological causes behind them. It was fear-mongering to allude that I'd show "signs" in a nonspecific amount of years. While we hadn't known the Earthlings long enough to disprove that, they'd not passed any ill effects to the prey animals on their blue marble. I leaned back in contempt, though I noticed Aucel scooting her chair further away from the humans. She wouldn't take much convincing to believe that the primates were an infectious threat, given her instinctual disgust to them.

I am curious what scientific account Maronis thinks he can string together; he does sound like he believes it himself, just like Nikonus did. I do want to know what pushed Aafa down the path of causing so much harm to hundreds of sapient species.

Whatever the truth was, it could be as simple as one predator being a carrier for many diseases, and the Commonwealth applying that logic to anything that ate flesh. Even if it were true about humans, we knew that alien diseases didn't cross the species threshold, due to differences in biology. I was at a loss, conjuring my own explanations; it seemed my Terran companions were mystified too.

Tyler confirmed that his helmet camera was rolling, fully intending to capture every word the Kolshian said on video. He rested his elbows on the table, sensing that juicy information was about to flow.

The blond human's expression was hidden beneath his mask. "Speak. Tell us everything, from the very beginning. How the shadow caste came to be is our business."

"Well, it started with a string of mysterious deaths, decades before we made first contact with the Farsul. The strange disease was 100% lethal and unresponsive to our medicines, so if symptoms showed, it was a death sentence." Maronis pulled up a series of mass graveyards, and ghastly images of sickly Kolshians. "They would lose their memory and their sensibilities, resulting in aggression and delusion. At first, the plague didn't seem to be transmissible from person-to-person, so we didn't quarantine victims with…a strict enough tentacle. It was only *years* later that the people who had contact started showing symptoms."

"That's a long-ass incubation period," Sam commented.

"Indeed. There wouldn't be a trace of any microbial agents in their tissue, and yet their brains were rapidly and positively ravaged. Once we clued in to the staggering delay in symptom onset, scientists were able to piece together the origin; stories from years before the first victims, where a local predator called the *tarani* went off the deep end, and started dropping dead in the wild. Select other animals in the ecosystem, to a lesser degree, had also begun to decay. We established a link between the increased predator activity, and the deaths that had plagued us."

Tyler recoiled in confusion. "I don't understand. How'd the Kolshians get infected to begin with…how's it spread? Y'all roamed the wilds enough for a plague to pop off?"

"We didn't know what the contaminant was, and we still don't. What we're certain of is that it contaminated the soil and the water, because victims were linked to nearby water mains and food shipments from the tarani plague's epicenter. That's why we can tell you scientifically that contact with predators and their byproducts leads to an irreversible decline. We called the disease The Hunger, and the entire government banded together to nip it in the bud."

"The Hunger," I murmured. "That's what you called the humans'

vitamin deficiency in the Archives."

"Now, you understand…and you'll understand how everything we've done has been to stop this scourge from ever showing its face. I'll address the human element after I've laid the groundwork, so there's no seeds of doubt. But to grasp where the shadow caste came from—I hope our citizens can understand what we're protecting them from—you have to know how we stopped the spread of the disease."

Samantha groaned. "Let me guess. Burn everything?"

"Actually, yes. Fire seemed to be the only thing that could cleanse away the contaminants."

While Chief Maronis searched up new images of the disease control efforts, I considered what I had just learned. The humans weren't reacting with enough concern toward this invisible plague that only showed the tendrils of its infection after years; the photographs that the Kolshian chieftain was displaying seemed like genuine historical documents. Had the Terrans not warned us about the risk of them spreading The Hunger, for fear it'd push us away? Perhaps they had a cure in the form of this B12 vitamin, but I didn't understand why the transmissible agent didn't show on any tests. Aucel looked more petrified than I was, with her extended contact with my friends today.

Maybe predator disease can be caused by other factors than an infectious agent, but the Kolshians were right about microbes being one cause. I just find it difficult to believe the caring humans would put the Venlil at risk like that; I've seen firsthand how empathetic and protective they are toward their friends. Surely they would have warned Governor Tarva…except Maronis claims they're unaware?

The Chief pulled up dated clips of Kolshian exterminators in full body suits, which had complex air filters atop the standard getup. I could see them burning the sickly corpses of curved-fang predators, and in some cases, living specimens that showed symptoms of the disease. In later timestamps, they had set out to wipe the tarani out entirely, even ones that hadn't presented with signs yet. The most horrifying footage was them tranquilizing their own infected citizens, before burning them alive. Corpses from the mass graveyard were also dug up and incinerated, to slow the soil contamination. This ghastly outbreak explained why they were so

determined to cleanse predators from every ecosystem.

“The exterminators were born. That firesuit acts not only as a safeguard from the flamethrowers, but also a biohazard suit—not unlike the gear the humans are wearing now. Those masks just might protect the Kolshians you’ve interacted with today,” Maronis continued. “Other predators besides the tarani were attracting the disease too, so we aimed to kill all of them. Any animal corpses had to be incinerated, before its entrails could settle. Our own dead were reservoirs of disease too. It’s the reason we have forsaken our aquatic roots; the water was its preserver. We’ve kept up those practices to this day to prevent it from ever returning, here or on other worlds.”

I swallowed with unease, disquieted by my months in close quarters with Terrans. “Chief, might I ask…does this relate to predator disease at all?”

“It does. By tearing down those predator disease facilities, those humans are crippling your ability to detect the disease early! Aggression is one of the primary signs. Besides that, we couldn’t afford to have any nonconformists violating our quarantine policies, or engaging in predatory behavior. We barely kept a lid on the spread.”

“That’s all well and dandy, but I don’t hear nothin’ about no shadow caste,” Tyler pointed out. “It doesn’t sound like you were doin’ this in secret.”

“We weren’t, with the public health measures being so obvious. The secrecy didn’t start until long after we put the plague to bed, when we turned our attention starward. We made contact with the Farsul, and eventually told them about The Hunger. They were able to point out isolated instances of Talsk’s animals suffering inexplicable declines in post-first contact times…while not as contagious as our case, it seemed to have jumped to their kind on occasion. We feared we brought the disease with us. We used old quarantine methods, before the contaminants could mutate to their most-transmissible form, to stop the Farsul from facing a similar outbreak to Aafa.”

Sam crossed her arms. “You magically knew it was the same sickness, and that it would turn out the same as your ‘Hunger’ shit?”

“Even if this one wasn’t the same pathogen, it was close enough to

hit home. Convergent evolution is our universe's reality, predator. It's why we see such similar patterns on all worlds. All lifeforms exist to accelerate entropy…chaos is the natural state of all we observe, and there is nothing that can facilitate such large-scale disarray and decline as this disease does. Lethal contaminants and predators are two tentacles of entropic force; it's why your ilk are found on all worlds. We do not accept this axiom."

"And we don't accept people calling us predators, but you always find a way to do it anyway. Why don't you skip to the part where the shadow caste comes into the picture?"

"It all traces back to the Krakotl…and the Farsul stopping us from doing what was necessary. It was a regrettable mistake to chance flesh-eaters escaping our oversight. Shall I continue, or is the long-maned one going to interrupt my story further?"

Aucel squeezed her eyes shut. "Please let him continue, Samantha. It explains a lot about why we're disgusted by predators. That response is triggered by ancestral sources of disease—"

"It's why humans are leery of insects," I remarked. "I'd also like to hear the rest of Maronis' story, Sam. I'm, er, *concerned*."

"You shouldn't be. We're not radiating invisible biohazards, for fuck's sake. But since Tyler's so keen on getting this jackass on the record, I'll let him talk a little longer," the Australian soldier conceded.

Good. I need to hear what he was going to say about the Krakotl; Nikonus mentioned that they were aggressive, and that the Kolshians tried to find the source of it. Maybe Nishtal's population was carrying The Hunger too?

The tenets I'd thought hadn't held a shred of truth were starting to make sense, in light of such dangerous contaminants that predators could pass along. At this point, I doubted the Chief had any incentive to lie, and he had the weight of evidence on his side. Maronis' insinuation was that his people wanted to exterminate the Krakotl, the second they identified the dietary risk. The question was why the Farsul States had pushed back against it, and how they'd crafted the curing process. This could be the reason my own species was converted away from omnivory, rather than killed; it might give us the full story of the conspiracy's founding and goals.

Maronis waved a tentacle dismissively. “You know the deal. The Krakotl were aggressive, and when we noticed their diet…it explained why their temperament was so much different from ours. Contaminants in meat impacted higher thinking, culminating in The Hunger after large quantities of buildup—perhaps passed down after it affects genes. We wanted to glass Nishtal, but the Farsul couldn’t live with killing another sapient race, not without exhausting alternatives.”

“The cure,” I breathed.

“Yes. The Archives were established on Talsk as a secluded location for the experiments, and a way to quarantine cured specimens. The Hunger didn’t present symptoms for years, so lengthy testing was the only way to gauge whether they’d been mellowed. The Farsul’s gene edits worked, to our surprise, and the Federation’s purpose was born. We’d stop all sapients from eating meat, and cleanse their worlds, to prevent exposure to The Hunger.”

Sam drummed her fingers with impatience. “I still hear fuck all about the shadow caste.”

“That all happened because there was public backlash to what we did to the Krakotl. Nishtal didn’t appreciate being saved at gunpoint either, and we worried they could seek regression some day. The shadow caste was formed of those who believed in the cause, and with the Farsul’s aid, we set out to wipe the record and disguise future cures. The only way to ensure the cured species never found out the past was to make our own citizens unaware.”

“Why is it fair that we don’t know the full extent of the predator threat? That our lives meant nothing to you? It clearly didn’t even work, because everyone found out the truth!” Aucel spat. “You helped the Arxur, and then these humans were left alive—”

“Darling, our plan worked for centuries, until *arrogant* Nikonus blabbed everything to a reporter! Just like he set about to reclaim anyone who rebelled against us, instead of crushing them like I did—they had their one chance during their uplifting. I agree that not knowing the full threat was a problem. The plague is still in the history books but…Aafa forgot why the pandemic was so scary. We needed a threat to continue to enforce our laws, and remind people why predators were dangerous. The Arxur were perfect for that.”

“You wanted the war, for *my family* to get fucking eaten alive, so

you had an excuse to keep up your quarantine measures?!" I hissed.

"Yes. You get it, Sovlin. Back to the Kolshian lady's point about our…predator occupiers here now, that's on the Farsul. They refused to kill humanity like we ordered and lied about it, even though it was clear these primates were beyond salvation. We tried to fix them, the same as any omnivore, but the quarantined Terrans in the Archives all exhibited traits of The Hunger. We know now that a…cobalamin vitamin gives them some strange, long-lasting immunity, rendering the disease dormant and allowing sustained sapience. This requires further study."

Samantha slapped her forehead. "So you *do* know about B12 now?"

"We got some humans to talk about how they could adapt to plants without dying, during our personal experiments at Mileau. We believe these renewed curing efforts might've been successful in ridding you of the disease, if you long-term abstained from flesh."

"Ain't happening, for many reasons, not least—"

"I know you can't give up your addiction on your own. But listen, if you care about the friends you've been infecting, who could start dying in a few years…without warning…you must continue our work. If you care, you'll leave the herbivores alone. Maybe you'll even become a new threat…enough to remind the masses to be afraid of predators. It's a sacrifice someone must make."

My eyes watered with sorrow, as Chief Maronis finished presenting his case. His explanation fit with everything we'd uncovered along our journey, and it gave a reason for the Federation's entire history. It seemed a cruel twist of fate that loyal, friendly humanity would be asked to make that sacrifice—to isolate themselves so not to contaminate their friends. I'd come to love my crew aboard Monahan's ship, and while the contamination sounded like a terrible way to go, I was willing to die for the Terrans' right to exist. Their culture was too rooted in hunting for them to give up their identity and cure themselves.

If humans were immune to the Hunger, as long as they could access B12, keeping to Earth and forsaking the Sapient Coalition might be the best option. I knew they'd never be the Arxur, not with how their empathy had prevailed time and again. My spines bristled as I waited for Tyler's response, which would address how the Terrans would handle this latent threat Maronis described. It didn't seem

fair that, after all this work to usurp the Kolshians as the galaxy's supreme power, the predators had to take their place in some capacity. They didn't deserve to suffer for factors beyond their control.

It's not their fault that they've been spreading The Hunger. I don't think what the Kolshians did was right, but we can't let predatory diseases wipe out the galaxy.

Tyler raised a finger, in a "wait a minute" gesture. "That's a nice theory, except for the fact it's all horseshit. We ain't infectious, and B12 don't work like that. Your 'Hunger' is caused by prions, man."

"Misfolded brain proteins," Samantha chimed in. "Freak mutations that are transmissible if you make contact with infected tissue. The reason you see it most in predators is because they eat said tissue."

Chief Maronis blinked, dumbfounded. "You know what causes The Hunger? You can treat it? I heard you did with your Archives' rescues…"

"The two aren't related. Prion diseases aren't treatable, but we can detect them with blood tests. We're not infected just by virtue of being predators or eating meat. That's the difference between us; we live in a world of science, and you live in a world of fear and speculation. We seek proof and answers, while you seek verification for your existing beliefs."

Tyler bobbed his head. "Our vision might be narrower than yours, but at least we ain't blind as y'all. Sounds to me like you did all of that horrible shit for nothing."

"It sounds like that to me too," Aucel hissed, while the Kolshian dissenters piped up with agreement. "You *believe* Terrans are moral, and care for their friends; you said so! You have zero proof the humans…or any omnivores are dangerous, after all."

"You tried to scare us into believing that it was dangerous to be around them. They're people like us, not biohazards or a threat; I'm sorry I considered it for a minute," I huffed. "This is just another falsehood you broadcasted."

"That's not possible. This human *says* it's transmitted by eating flesh!" Maronis protested, his tentacles flailing in frantic motions. "The Hunger is seen on Earth, like every other world. We did this to save all sapient life!"

Tyler slammed a fist on the table. “We don’t need your salvation. We need two things: your surrender, and you personally to show us where you keep your prisoners. This is our galaxy to run, and we ain’t gonna be keeping up the death and suffering circus. ‘Cause you’re the real predators. You’ve led the galaxy into ignorance; ‘decline and disarray.’ Your legacy is *entropy,* huh?”

“I…if my words haven’t moved you, maybe that is all we leave behind. We were supposed to save lives, and without that purpose, the shadow caste is nothing. I’ll order the workers to surrender, and lead you to the place where we keep humanity’s friends. Follow me.”

The Kolshian chieftain stood with a defeated posture, reeling from the humans’ certainty that so-called prions were responsible for their plague. It was a positive sign that the shadow caste agreed to stand down, with their mission undermined and their fleet erased. I was relieved to hear that the Terrans weren’t a hazard, and that their science had illuminated the dark corners of our past once more. Where Maronis claimed to have a mountain of evidence on his side, it was the predators who could interpret it correctly. Aucel, the other Kolshian citizens listening, and anyone watching Tyler’s video would see who was in touch with reality.

Once we recovered our friends, the next item on the agenda would be to set the galaxy onto a better path. There were many issues to iron out, but with the Federation’s lies and deceit stripped away, I was hopeful we could birth a new era of enlightenment.

Chapter 176

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 26, 2137

I was glad to have a moment to relax and contemplate the city, rather than listen to Kolshian spiels. There were engineering advantages to building underground. Natural disasters aboveground wouldn't touch the shadow caste, and the insulation of the encompassing topsoil entailed a constant temperature. It wouldn't need excessive budget expenditures on air conditioning and heating. It did pose the question of how close to the surface Aafa's groundwater was, and how they'd handle any leakage.

This seemed a modernized version of sprawling underground cities on Leirn, such as Thysun's *Calamya's Burrow*, a massive complex that could house tens of thousands of occupants. Its main intention was as sanctuary from invaders during the Grain Wars—

Human fingers snapped right next to my left eye. "Onso, are you daydreaming about some engineering shit?"

"What can I say: I can't handle boredom. Glad you're back safely. That didn't take long," I remarked, flicking an ear at Tyler.

"We got the shadow caste's surrender, and found out this all has to do with a prion plague. One more step 'fore gettin' out of here."

Aucel's bulbous eyes looked glazed over. "The government never believed that humanity was dangerous at all. I saw prey-like behavior on their data dump, but it was so misaligned with my instincts. The reason I feel like I'm going to puke, just looking at them…it's selective breeding, based on a false threat. It's all just lies."

"I know how that feels," Sovlin sighed. "My society, my family, the Federation I wasted my life on, my identity as a Gojid, and my knowledge as a captain. It's all gone down the drain. If an old man like me can find a way forward, then you can too."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Stop right there. Your way forward is tricking people into calling Onso slurs."

"It's okay, Sam. That's what I expect from a spikeback," I said cheekily, using the human-invented word. "Now why the fuck are

we drifting after some old Kolshian? I'm just following you guys."

"Maronis here is supposed to be leading us to Slanek, assuming he's part of their prisoner collection."

"I hope that Venlil is alright. I feel responsible…for setting his fate in motion," Sovlin sighed.

Tyler pursed his lips. "I don't know if he's there, but I sure don't think you'll be a welcome sight if he remembers anything. I ain't gotta tell you how he feels about you."

My whiskers twitched with nostalgia. "Last time we spoke, Slanek told me he was unwell. I warned him not to use *those* two words."

"Why don't we save the speculation on his mental state for *if* we find him?" Sam asked. "Keep moving, stay alert. I'd trust the word of the fucking boy who cried wolf over Maronis."

"Me too," Tyler agreed. "But given how old this squid is, I doubt the lockup is a long walk from his ivory tower. We'll see who our supposed prisoner friends are."

Our posse, along with a sizable contingent of UN soldiers and angry Kolshian citizens, marched after Maronis for a firsthand glimpse at how the shadow caste caged insurrectionists. I processed the tidbits of new information as we walked, leaving a mental note to read up on transmission methods of this prion plague. While I hadn't heard the Commonwealth's rationale from their lips, I could assume they linked eating meat to the acquisition of the disease in some way. Somehow, they decided predators' elimination was for the benefit of "all life" (except the predators, of course), then used that to justify forcing their ideology on hundreds of worlds. Why that excused a silent partnership with the Arxur, or crushing unruly herbivores like us Yotul, was another matter.

There's no consistency, even in their internal logic. Whatever piss-poor justification they make for their all-encompassing control, I'm happy with my decision not to listen to their disingenuous desperation. I knew it'd be some shitty excuse.

Chief Maronis shuffled toward a sprawling complex, a single-story structure which lacked exterior clues to what hid inside its confines. The decrepit concrete walls looked bleak enough to be a prison, and the sensory input didn't brighten at all when we stepped inside. Rows of hallways passing forward were arranged under Kolshian

numerals, with the centermost one having the two slanted lines that represented “1.” I wasn’t sure why the count started at the center, and judging by how mystified Tyler behaved behind his visual translator, he wasn’t either. The Kolshian leader started toward the dim corridor at the complex’s heart, leading into its recesses; the humans were quick to stop him for a question-and-answer section.

“Why the central chamber?” Tyler barked, suspicion emanating from his voice. “What are the other ones?”

Maronis made a sweeping gesture with his tentacles. “This isn’t the only shadow caste prison…the one under the capital is reserved for disloyal citizens aboveground, and foreign actors who are working against our interests. They’re arranged by the severity of their actions: the closer you get to Row 1, the more grave your misdeed. That, and it’s usually reserved for individuals who are well-known in the public eye and could have propaganda uses. There are plenty of citizens in the other halls, but I know who you’re here for. You want Row 1 and the lab.”

I stiffened with alarm. “The lab? A lab…for what?”

“I don’t like the sound of that neither. Are y’all cookin’ up some *cure* shit back there?” Tyler parroted my concerns.

Chief Maronis blinked in irritation. “The shadow capital’s research lab is for several purposes. Yes, it’s a backup, in the instance that we need to take up our own research: a prudent choice, given what happened on Talsk. We might’ve…dabbled in some human experiments, after encouraging results at Mileau. With the new information at hand, it might’ve been possible to integrate you, rather than relegate you to the Arxur’s role. However, its primary service to our cause is as a…*neurological studies* facility.”

The fur on my hackles raised, as I picked up on the implication. “A predator disease facility. Is that where you’ve been keeping Slanek?”

“I’d say it’s more focused on the success of our re-education measures, as well as analyzing the brain scan data to better understand and target aggressive areas. Some people need to be… reminded of the proper beliefs. The Venlil who shot Nikonus in cold blood, after exposure to humans, is a prime example.”

“What the fuck have you done?”

“He’s here,” the elderly Kolshian purred, sick amusement in his eyes. “But he won’t be thrilled to see your predator friends.”

My hindlegs bunched up to lunge at the elderly Kolshian, but Tyler hurriedly pushed me back. I could sense anger projecting from his gaze, beneath the biohazard mask, and wondered why he had stopped me from putting this old chieftain in his place. How dare he use such a flippant tone to talk about rewriting someone’s brain, no doubt through cruel, invasive methods? The blond human revealed his rationale for stopping me, as his gloved hand curled up into a fist. Before hundreds of witnesses, he smashed his knuckles into the Kolshian’s eye, smashing through the socket. I could see Sovlin wince, knowing from his first meeting with Officer Cardona how strong the gargantuan primate could be.

Does Tyler think that I can’t fight for myself? I’m more than capable of taking on an arrogant, elderly despot, especially one who’s so casual about horrific deeds.

“Let me take a swing at him!” I protested, as Maronis nursed an eye that was turning purple. “For everything he’s done.”

Tyler shook out his hand, flexing his fingers. “Nah, we’re done now. I ain’t gonna let you swing at him, ’cause if anyone gets in trouble outta this, it should be me. That was for Marcel, and for Slanek; don’t you ever mock him again. To be clear, we will come back for *everyone* wrongfully detained here. Take us down to Row 1, and try to learn some *empathy* on the way.”

Aucel turned to Sovlin. “I thought you said the humans weren’t gonna attack without warning!”

The Gojid chewed at his claws with discomfort. “Um, the Chief deserved it.”

“I don’t disagree; he threw away countless Kolshian lives. I’m pissed at him too. I just want an honest answer about how high their threshold for violence is, so that I don’t say anything that provokes an assault.”

“Unless you torture their friends, you’re fine. Tyler saves his beatdowns for special cases.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “But if I threw a right hook at a prisoner, I’d be *unhinged*.”

“Well, I knew Slanek and Marcel, *and* I have a better right hook,”

Tyler said.

“Pfft. Tell yourself whatever you need to sleep at night, but you don’t have a boxing career in your future. Now make that Kolshian sot get his ass in gear.”

“I give the orders here…but get the fuck moving, Maronis, or I will let Sam swing at your other eye!”

Chief Maronis marched down the central corridor, as the Terrans kept their wary eyes trained for any traps. The Commonwealth leader was still reeling from Tyler’s punch; Nikonus’ replacement leaned over a retinal scanner, mumbling a remark about the primates being lucky they hadn’t tenderized both of his eyes. There were clicks as blast door mechanisms came loose, and it slowly creaked open to reveal the full hallway. Dingy prison cells lined both sides, with despairing inmates backing away from the bars at the sound of our footsteps. Some of the prisoners were, in fact, Kolshians, but there were a number of different species scattered in the hundreds of cells.

Any resident of Aafa with serious aspirations of unseating the Commonwealth government would land themselves in here. The stench was unmistakable, showing that they’d had negligible access to hygiene facilities. A handful seemed happy to see a human posse marching in, and begged for us to let them out. Some UN soldiers kept back to help liberate and document the captives, perhaps taking meticulous records for the Sapient Coalition or the Duerten Shield to witness. The Kolshian protestors tagging along seemed horrified, after hearing that some of their own neighbors could be thrown here, without due process. Aucel looked like she wished she could swing at Maronis herself.

There’s more prisoners here than I expected, but no sign of Slanek or a lab. If these are the average inmate’s accommodations in this facility, I don’t want to imagine what his life has been like.

The bars of a cage next to us rattled, drawing our attention. I saw a tear-stricken Kolshian, pressing his face against the barrier; something about his violet visage tickled my memory. Sovlin paused for a brief second, before his eyes widened. Tyler craned his neck at us, confused why the two herbivores in his squad were stopping. The Gojid moved closer to the cell, and the prisoner’s eyes —tinged with a bit of instinctive disgust to the humans—widened

with desperation.

“Help me!” the Kolshian pleaded, in a hoarse voice.

Sovlin tilted his head. “You’re the Kolshian commander from the Battle of Khoa. I’m sure of it. Captain Monahan talked you into having the fleet stand down. What the fuck are you doing in here? Did you realize what you were doing was wrong?”

“I…I didn’t want to kill civilians. Herbivores. The human…I remember what she said. That you would reach Aafa. You have now, and if we’re still standing, I did the right thing. I saved my men from a battle we couldn’t win. If you wouldn’t sacrifice the Mazics…how could I?”

Tyler wheeled on Maronis. “Why is he here?”

“I don’t know why *every* prisoner is here,” the Chief grumbled. “This one, I do. Commander Telvos humiliated the Commonwealth, and disobeyed direct orders. He allowed your allies to survive, abandoning the battle. We could not tolerate treasonous defiance—questioning of our orders.”

“The greatest treason of all: asking questions.” My ears pinned back with fury, though it was cathartic to see Maronis’ swollen eye staring back at me. I still wanted to beat the shit out of this pompous asshole. “You tried so hard to snuff out curiosity and wonder for the universe.”

Aucel scowled. “In prison for not rendering the Mazics extinct. You shadow caste are monsters.”

“Spare me the indictment. Do you want me to take you to Slanek, or do you want to lament *every* prisoner’s life story? If it’s the former, I suggest we keep moving.”

Chief Maronis didn’t wait for an answer, stomping off down the hallway, as pleas for help rose from the furthest cells. A duo of UN soldiers stopped off to guard Telvos’ cage; we weren’t going to get involved with freeing an enemy commander, especially considering that he’d threatened to obliterate a civilian populace—under orders or not, it was a war crime by Terran law. As we drew nearer to the far wall, which seemed to be a containment bulkhead on closer inspection, another prisoner clamored for our attention. This time, I recognized the alien face outright. It was the testy Duerten ambassador to Earth, Coji: the one who’d jumped at the chance to

abet Nikonus' assassin. She'd been missing ever since, and unlike Slanek, the Kolshians hadn't publicized her capture.

The Duerten were never overly fond of humans, and that started from the top. Coji may not have the knowledge that the UN saved Kalqua, given that she was captured well before that started.

"Humans!" the gray avian squawked, wrapping stress-plucked wings around the bars. "I'm sorry…for everything—for ever rebuffing your friendship. Please, let me out! It's horrible here…I hear screams from the lab, all the time. I think it's going to be me next. They kept my mind intact so I could watch what they did to Kalqua, clip by clip. Are there any survivors?! LET ME OUT!"

Samantha crossed her arms. "We bailed Kalqua out, though I'm sure the Kolshians omitted that part. There were still billions that died, but without the UN, it would've been the whole fucking planet."

"The Shield fought beside us here, at the Battle of Aafa. Seems your side finally wants to be on better terms," Sovlin grumbled. "Your leadership definitely want to bomb this world, but the humans got them to hold off long enough for us to scope out the shadow caste."

"The entire Homogeneity fleet came," I added. "I caught the reasoning as, if our side lost, then Kalqua would be overrun by the Commonwealth anyway. We have the chance to tear down the Federation…and for you to return as your homeworld is rebuilt. Their alterations of our societies, and stifling rule: over. Finished. Thank humanity for making it happen."

Coji's beak parted with hope. "If what you're saying is true, it seems we owe humanity a huge debt. It did seem odd, that the Kolshians only showed me clips from a small time frame…and not the aftermath. I'm relieved to know some of us survived, and I want to help with revenge on Aafa. Let me out!"

"Well, we would like the Duerten to be more open to our friendship." Tyler hesitated, before punching the button to unlock Coji's door. The avian stumbled forward on unsteady feet, before wrapping her wings around his waist, sobbing. "Easy now. Say, I wondered why you helped kill Nikonus too."

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you!* The Archives: the Kolshians and the Farsul stripped us of individual thought. Our opinions were too strong, our intellect too sharp for them. How do you ever get that

back? Who are we? The consensus on Kalqua…and my individual feeling…was that they needed to pay. We made a decision based on emotion, and it felt good."

"Was it worth it?" I questioned. "Billions of Duerten died because of that one irrational choice."

"If I had known what would've happened to my beautiful home, I would've never put this plan in motion. We didn't think; we just wanted the figurehead who *took* our minds dead! I knew our role would be glaring, but I didn't imagine it'd condemn Kalqua. When I tried to fly away from Nikonus' corpse…a 'drone' had no trouble tracking me down and caging me. I've all but forgotten what life looks like, or how it feels to have air under my wings. My sole thoughts are dreams of home."

My friend carefully removed Coji's arms from his torso, wishing to keep moving. "We got a real special friend of mine to rescue. I don't know what you meant by screams in the lab, but I ain't wantin' to leave Slanek in there a second longer. We are happy you're safe, and you are goin' home, Ambassador. Head over to the medics back there, and they'll find you a transport."

"Thank you, again! I'm sorry that I didn't see your kindness sooner…but I hope we can meet again, so I can make up for my past hostility!"

"If you want to make up for it, keep your people's bombers at bay. We want to do a thorough investigation of the shadow caste, which could take weeks. Plus, there's a lotta victims to rescue. We need the Shield to stay patient and give us time to do our jobs, for everyone's sake."

"Whatever pull I have with my government, I'll see that you have as much time as you need. Good luck, humans!"

The Duerten ambassador trudged off in the direction of Terran medics, all but collapsing in their arms. Comprehending the stories of every prisoner in these walls would take months. After encountering a number of familiar faces along the way, it drilled home how punitive the Kolshians were to anyone who thwarted their wishes. From Khoa to Kalqua, there had been no tolerance for rebellion; any people who gave humanity the slightest aid were whisked away, if the shadow caste could get their tentacles on those poor souls. I doubted they'd been more merciful during other

battles and incidents.

Maronis had gotten to work opening the bulkhead, which concealed the lab behind its structure. If the lab was the heart of Kolshian experimentation, I was worried about what state we'd find Slanek in. I'd heard the words from the Chief's lips, before Tyler threw a haymaker at him. There had been the idle comments about so-called neurological focuses, and it was a safe assumption that re-education was tantamount to rewriting neurochemistry. It was quite possible that our Venlil friend wouldn't be happy to see us, which meant he might not accompany us willingly. I could only imagine how devastated Marcel would be, if his exchange partner abhorred his existence.

Our Venlil might not be the only person back there either. Maronis had claimed that the shadow caste "dabbled" in human experiments after Mileau. This matched with Coji's mention of multiple screams hailing from the lab; the inhumane procedures could be stretched to several test subjects, for different purposes. It was a good thing that the UN soldiers wore biohazard gear to Aafa, because the cure was the only type of "integration" efforts the Kolshians had for omnivores. There was no telling how terrible the conditions would be in the lab, but I was prepping myself for the worst. It would be a positive outcome if our friend's persona was still in there at all.

Chapter 177

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: March 26, 2137

When the lab became accessible, I could see excesses of equipment; shadow caste workers must've been cleared out, but the traces of their presence were still there. A dirty plate left out on a countertop, a chemical beaker which had been hastily put away, and *crimson* blood samples still on slates under microscopes. The Kolshian chief waited as we passed the last prison cells, stepping into the deepest recess of the facility. It was rare that visible fright displayed on Tyler's face, but I could tell that worrying about Slanek made him sick to his stomach. Sovlin and Samantha, meanwhile, were off in their own land, commenting on days long gone.

"Remember when you and…" the Gojid's voice hitched, as Carlos' name fizzled out in his throat. "The Takkan ambassador was taken prisoner by the Kolshians, and you snuck off to set him free. Was the prison similar?"

Samantha shook her head. "Not at all. It was on a tiny 'quasi-satellite' of Aafa, and while it wasn't advertising its existence, it wasn't too hard to trace where they took him. I don't know why they didn't hide him away. Maronis, care to comment?"

"That was an interrogation facility, a public one, for predator diseased individuals," Chief Maronis replied. "Nikonus' plan wasn't to make Ambassador Wolrie vanish, but to blame him as an accomplice—and show that we had caught the predator in a deceitful act, a little too late. We turned Wolrie in to the public caste with the claim that he'd been overheard, telling Noah how to sabotage the engine. Their decision was to interrogate him, before he would've been returned to a cell up above our heads, where other publicly-known traitors, like Recel, were held."

Aucel's tentacles tensed up, and her tail bunched up as well. "My brother was not a traitor! You dragged Wolrie's name through the mud too over being an accomplice. I believed your story, that a bloodlusting human sabotaged the shuttles. You *murdered* my brother, and now I find out, he wasn't the only innocent person you

wanted to smear."

"There needed to be a reason why other species couldn't attempt diplomacy with Earth. Every diplomat's death, and selling the narrative that humanity turned an ambassador into an accomplice —because Noah couldn't make it back to Skalga without dreaming about murdering an unsuspecting soul—"

"Shut the fuck up," I hissed. "I didn't want to listen to your rationale before, and I sure as shit don't want to hear it now. Humans just wanted peace, and you didn't care who got hurt along the way, if it meant their kindness failed."

Tyler smacked his fist against his other palm threateningly. "Let's not ask this sack of shit any more questions. I ain't able to keep my cool through more of his answers. I wanna get to Slanek, no stallin' or nothing."

"I opened the door. The female predator asked me a question," Maronis protested.

Samantha shook her head. "You answered it, but with way more grandstanding than was necessary. Let's try again with a different question. Where the fuck is Slanek?"

The Kolshian chief took several steps back, before leading the way into the sprawling chamber. The right side seemed to be examination rooms and surgical suites, which left me shuddering to think of the implications. Off on the left wing, where Maronis was hurrying toward, were living quarters; cramped rooms with elevated, oval-shaped doors that reminded me of the brig on our ship. The first prisoners we passed were Dossur, which merited a pit stop from some UN soldiers. These must be the civilians the Kolshians snatched on their way from Mileau, and apparently dropped off part of the way to Kalqua. I was alarmed to see that the rodents acted petrified, upon sighting the humans—it didn't bode well for how Slanek had endured re-education.

Slanek was much closer and fonder of Terrans than random civilians, even ones selected for being troublemakers, I tried to reassure myself. *He wouldn't crumble under pressure as easily. And I guess it's positive that these Dossur weren't ferried to Kalqua's battle, to be killed with the Kolshian ships?*

Multiple Dossur could be packed into the cells, though we didn't

stop to coax or sedate them amid our panic. Tyler was single-minded in marching toward Slanek's alleged location, all but breathing down Maronis' neck as the chieftain stepped through a sealed partition. There were more holding areas, exactly like the ones we just passed, but less of these were occupied. My eyes widened with shock; even my friend, who hadn't wanted to pause for any other interruptions, skidded to a halt. The pensive visages staring back at us were humans—the more energetic ones pounded against the glass.

I knew that the Kolshians got their tentacles on some Terrans, who were left behind at a Dossur maintenance station. However, since those poor primates had been rescued back when Marcel got dosed with the cure, I hadn't been sure what Maronis meant by "dabbling" in human experiments. It would've been difficult to elope in a hurry with predators, given there was no evidence they were moved to the Dossur homeworld. Less than a dozen total Earthlings were in this ward, which led me to conclude a single Commonwealth vessel slipped off with them in tow after initial successes.

The shadow caste must've been running the same cruel experiments here, adjacent to the ones in Mileau's system. These humans had been languishing under Federation integration attempts, which must've entailed fundamental changes to their neurochemistry and behavior. The fact they weren't repulsed to see UN soldiers was a positive sign; it meant they hadn't been persuaded that Earth's government was backward and evil. I had never seen Terrans look this feeble, with thousand-yard stares and shaking hands a common trait among the victims. Was this the state the Kolshians would've left the entire human race in, had their original uplift succeeded?

It reminded me of how I felt under the predator disease drugs. A spectator in my own body, with stimulating thoughts locked far out of reach. I knew what it was like to have your personality suppressed under a haze of medication, with no end to the dreary days in sight. There was no greater part of any sapient that could be ripped away than their sanctity of mind. Seeing twenty years of my own misery reflected in binocular eyes, it evoked a painful level of empathy. I hoped the UN could free them from both the mental and physical cages.

"What the fuck is this?" Samantha spat, stomping her boot heel into Maronis' tail.

The Kolshian chief's eyes widened with alarm. "Don't hurt me! I definitely warned you about this. You're merely too aggressive, like the Krakotl. We thought you could become more docile…prey-like…more than the Arxur. Our ambitions went beyond curing you."

"Do you have *any* idea what it's like, to be so medicated you can't feel *anything?"* My hiss was low and ostensibly calm, though my tail lash betrayed my emotions. "For me, it was all because people derided my race and my loved ones until I couldn't take it—with words that aren't dissimilar to what Sovlin says now. I was deemed too aggressive for snapping. I deserved it for being a *primitive,* just like they're *predators*. What, pray, was your ambition with the Yotul?"

"To direct your culture along proper avenues. We gave you so many gifts, that you would've never seen in your lifetime without us!"

Sovlin flexed his claws, stepping between me and Maronis. "That's not the least bit true. I'm sorry, Onso. I didn't want to hurt you; I like you, I do, and the jabs turned into a game for me. I was just frustrated with Tyler and my therapist for harping on my language, and my thoughts, and it's so damn hard to change *everything*. I can't do anything right, so I…pushed back in defiance. I know you're smarter and better than me at everything, and I feel quite outshone by you."

"You think I don't know you're jealous? It's fine. It's *his* fault, not yours," I growled.

"But that's also why I know your people didn't need the Federation for shit. The fake Kolshian culture was fine for me, without knowing everything they believed in being a lie—then it broke me. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. It was easier believing the lie, easier not knowing the Gojids were changed too. Maronis, no gifts that you could've given the Yotul would be worth the mental *anguish* and the millions of deaths that come with it."

"That's—" Maronis began.

"I'm not done! You admitted not too long ago that your legacy was decline and decay, and your purposeless society is worth nothing. Your caste was an ignorant bunch of idiots living in fear, who wanted everyone else to be the same. All of us have suffered as a direct result of your actions: Onso and I have that so thoroughly in

common. Aucel and Sam lost their loved ones to you, and Tyler is only here because his friend was almost driven to suicide—by your cure and torture of Slanek. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, but I just inherited—"

"You did nothing to change it! You excused it and created your own fucking mishaps, and the smug aura has returned after only a moment's hint of remorse. So unless you want to apologize, I suggest you shut up and take us to Slanek—before I shove my claws somewhere you *don't* want me to shove them."

Chief Maronis withered beneath the Gojid's blistering scowl, and gestured to follow him in tail language. The humans might not have understood the exact words, but they could infer the meaning from Sovlin's reaction. While we proceeded to what was hopefully Slanek's locale, other Terrans set about liberating the cured test subjects; I knew what it would be like for the victims to cobble together the pieces of their mind. They were strong enough to find a way forward, but I didn't envy that journey. However, if the Venlil we were sent to rescue was no longer himself, I wasn't sure he could claw his way back. He'd been upset by his own personality before any of this, which led to him going off the deep end.

The most insightful bit of information was about my Gojid comrade's state of mind. My ears angled toward Sovlin, weighing his unexpected, passionate defense of the Yotul. I had never believed he hated me, instead believing that he was long in the tooth and set in his ways, but I hadn't considered a deeper struggle than that. The raw agony he'd felt, every time he discussed losing his family, told me he'd suffered as much as I had, albeit in a different way. His purpose for pressing on, seeking vengeance in their names, was a lie; how could he cope with his entire world being exposed as a falsehood?

To that old man, the humans' revelations against the conspiracy must've felt the same as it did to us Yotul, when aliens tampered with our entire belief system. The Federation mindset was as ingrained, and fundamental, as any sapient's identity…from Sovlin's perspective.

Knowing how much guilt he felt over Slanek's predicament, I made a mental note to protect the Gojid, if the Venlil reacted poorly to his presence. Maronis had gloated that our Skalgan friend wouldn't be happy to see the humans, but I trusted the primates to subdue an

herbivore who was burdened by reignited instincts. However, something told me that, if any of Slanek's anger still existed, Sovlin wouldn't fight back due to his sense of guilt. I readied myself as we entered a secluded room, complete with a projector and neurocranial instruments. The dark-gray fur, and black tuft atop his forehead, was unmistakable…but I was instantly worried the Venlil we knew was gone.

If the Kolshians had tinkered with his brain to such extensive lengths, the damage could be irreparable. There was an apathy to his sluggish movements that went beyond what we'd seen with the drugged humans, and his eyes looked like they struggled to take in the new visitors. However, once Slanek realized that binocular eyes were staring at him, he squealed; his limbs began shaking, more profusely than they had before. Tears matted his cheeks, though his gaze still looked empty and disoriented. The Venlil struggled to duck behind his bed, as his legs twitched like he wished to flee.

"M-monster! Help!" Slanek pleaded.

I eased myself forward, signaling for Sovlin to stay where he was. "Hi, Slanek. It's me, Onso. Do you remember me?"

"I've never seen you before. B-but I know the h-humans brainwashed me, and I can't remember a lot of it. They f-fight the entire galaxy…I saw the war footage. Horrible things. Meat eaters. Made me k-kill people. They must've done the same to you. I don't want to go back! I'd rather die."

"Everything you're telling me is wrong, Slanek. This isn't you; you can feel that. You were very close friends with the humans, before the Kolshians scrambled your brain…and made you forget how they *crippled* the Venlil. I know that you were angry when that happened."

Tyler tiptoed after me, with the biohazard mask covering his eyes. "Slanek, we came to rescue you. You can come home now. You were part of the exchange program; you were there for the empathy tests! The Kolshians wanted to wipe us out, but you fought to protect Earth—you *lived* there. How can you not remember any of that?"

The Venlil didn't seem to be listening to a word Tyler said, shutting down at the sight of an approaching Terran. I flicked my ears at my exchange partner, warning him not to intervene. The blond human

seemed dejected by Slanek's condition, though I noticed him fiddling with his holopad. I took a cautious step toward the Venlil, resting a gentle paw on his shoulder. It was disheartening to find him in such a pitiful state; I wasn't sure the person Marcel and Tyler fought to save was salvageable. The Kolshians succeeded in making the poor guy believe humans were monsters, wiping his memories of their shared past altogether. He was worse off than his likely state during first contact. There was nothing left of the person we knew.

We need to sedate him and take him to a hospital; there's no way to convince him humans aren't taking him off to be cattle "again." The Kolshians broke him.

"What's the last thing you remember?" I whispered.

Slanek rocked back and forth. "F-family. Brother died…Arxur. It's all fuzzy. Hurts to search…not there."

"It's okay. You don't have to push yourself. I wish you did remember, but it's not your fault. We all will help you, no matter what."

"Last thing I remember…the h-humans landed to kill us all. Bunkers. Cold. Then, it's like I w-was unconscious, but not. Fragments and whispers to grasp at: mostly a name. Someone who meant the world to me."

"Marcel," Tyler interjected, startling the Venlil.

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO MARCEL?" Slanek bellowed, fur sticking upright. It was the first moment he looked alert during this entire conversation. "How do you know that name?"

*"*You remember Marcel. Uh, Marcel is fine! He and I are very good friends; he's a great dude. You wanna talk to him?"

Samantha raised a finger. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Me neither," Sovlin chimed in, keeping himself hidden behind Aucel and Sam. "Marcel was beyond depressed when Slanek was captured. He's tired of life kicking him down. I can't predict how he'll react if Slanek rejects him."

"No. Please!" Slanek wailed. "Want to talk to Marcel. M-miss Marcel."

Tyler offered an apologetic shrug. "Uh, sorry guys, but I already

called him…and he just picked up? Here."

I retrieved the holopad from my exchange partner, to see a befuddled Marcel staring at the screen. Slanek leapt at me with disjointed motions, ripping the device out of my hands with desperation. His brief excitement deflated as he laid eyes on the human's scarred face, though he didn't react with the repulsed fear he had to Tyler and Sam. The Venlil's ears twisted with confusion, and conflicting emotions rushed through his horizontal pupils. Captain Fraser, meanwhile, had watering eyes, and his face contorted with relief. The Terran soldier seemed unaware of how little his friend remembered.

"Slanek! I'm so happy you're okay…I'm sorry, sorrier than you can imagine, for what happened to you. Whatever they've done to you, it's over; you're safe. You can come home!" Marcel gushed. "Jensi! Come here—hurry! Oh, thank you so much, Tyler—you're a real bro!"

Slanek pinned his ears back. "You're…human. Should be terrible. W-why do I feel like I love you?"

"What?" Marcel's weepy smile faltered, and his pupils darted back and forth, searching Slanek's expression. His eyes darkened with realization. "Oh. You don't remember me. Um, it's because we loved each other. We were closer than blood brothers. We went through so much together, and there was *nothing* I wouldn't have done for you. If I could trade places and save you from your suffering, I would. I wish I was there, Slanek, to tell you that it's going to be okay. To protect you."

"Why are you in my house? Did…did you capture my mother?"

Jensi, who'd just peeked into the frame, swooned with delight. "Slanek, what nonsense are you on about? The last thing you told me before running off was to take care of Marcel, if I still loved you—and that he'd be a 'better son.' I did what you asked, but *you* are my son. I was never looking for an upgrade. You have no idea how much it hurt t-to…lose another son."

Marcel squeezed Jensi's wrist. "We're going to remind him who he is. It's okay. It'll be you, me, and Nulia. Oh, that's right; she'll be delighted to see Uncle Slanek! She, um…showed up on our doorstep. Lucy doesn't want the responsibility anymore. That's okay, because we can have our own family. It's not too late to make

a new life."

"I want my old life! You're a *predator,* from a race of killers. I don't know you," Slanek mewled.

"But I know you. The fact that you remember me at all means they couldn't take what we had away from you. Here, look! I've kept these; I looked at them every day to think about you." Marcel held up a printed photograph, with frantic enthusiasm. It showed a grief-stricken Slanek, sitting beside the human's broken body in a hospital bed. "You were there when I was almost killed. You saved my life, and nursed me back to health. Can't you see how much you cared? You didn't leave me, even when you could've had someone without baggage…or scars. Like I won't give up on you now."

"You look…starved there. I look…sad? That looks real."

"It is real! You were part of an exchange program between our species. I can show you all our chats. Hell, I'd be happy to have them again." Marcel flipped a series of pictures in quick succession, rushing to find evidence for Slanek. "This is you being the first Venlil to visit Earth, standing with our leader. Oh, this is you with a can of potato chips: you can discover them all over again, Salt Monster! Here's us at the camp on the cradle."

"The cradle?"

"It's a long story. We fought the Arxur time and again; together, we were unstoppable. I'll tell you everything we went through, the good and the bad, and what really happened, with proof—not what the Kolshians said. I wish I could do so much over. But as long as you remember the slightest bit of what we were, we can get through this. Do you believe me?"

"My brain doesn't…but my heart does. I believe you. Only you."

"I'm so proud of you, Slanek. Our memories might be gone for you, but nobody can take what we had. Those nice people are my friends, *your* friends, and they flew across the galaxy to bring you home. I need you to go with them, and I'll be here waiting, huh? You need anything, you call. I'll be as patient and supporting as you need."

"Okay, but they're scary. I…think I'll go with the Yotul."

"Yes, go with the Yotul! No time like the present. One foot in front of the other, and you'll be home in no time."

“Talk more. Not ready. W-want to know everything.”

“We can talk for as long as you want once you’re safe on their ship. That’s all that matters. Please, be brave…for Jensi and I. I’ll be in touch *very* soon.”

Slanek’s shoulders sagged as Marcel disconnected from the call; I gently pried the holopad out of his paws, and returned it to Tyler. The blond primate gave me the slightest nod, gratitude for seeing our mission fulfilled. It was more than I expected, to see any trace of the Venlil’s old self still kicking. After sticking with my buddy through a ferocious fight, we could finally leave this rock, and return to a normal life. The galaxy could have a fresh start, just like Slanek, with humanity at the reins. All of us would be returning home to a new era led by the United Nations.

I wrapped my paw around Slanek’s shoulders, and coaxed him toward the exit before he had second thoughts. Sovlin sported an expression of visible relief, after how responsive the Venlil had been to Marcel. The Gojid caught me observing him, and gave me a grudging claw flick of respect. I returned the gesture with my ears, musing what kind of future the old man would have. It was then I noticed him guiding Aucel, with fatherly affection; it was clear he intended to bring Recel’s sister back to Earth, where Vysith and Hunter waited. The former captain might’ve figured out what to do with himself more than he thought.

With the last part of our mission complete, it was time for us to seek out new lives in well-earned peacetime.

Chapter 178

Memory transcription subject:*Chief Hunter Isif, Arxur Rebellion Command*

Date [standardized human time]: April 6, 2137

After devoting hundreds of thousands of ships to the Kolshian cause, then having a large portion of those vessels turned against Betterment's mandate, Giznel's regime had all but collapsed as soon as humanity won. That selfish despot only wanted to save his own hide, at the end of the day; after an offer of exile to an uninhabited moon, he handed over his command to the rebellion without a fight. At this point, following the changes in allegiance mid-battle, we'd had numbers on our side. I would've liked to see "Prophet" Laznel's line brought to an immediate end, but I'd settle for avoiding further losses. My return to Wriss as the presumed leader would be the first time I'd been there in years, since I'd been stationed all the way out by Skalga.

The future of the Arxur wouldn't be as sapient-eating monsters, beholden to basic needs and aspiring to cruelty. Assuming Secretary-General Zhao could persuade the Sapient Coalition to leave us be, during the upcoming convention to write the Treaty of Sol, we could start rebuilding our society into its former self. I wished at a time like this that Vysith hadn't turned her back on her people; a soldier from the long-gone Morvim Charter could be a leading voice in defending "defectiveness." It would be an arduous battle stretching decades to convince my people that empathy was not weakness, especially since sociopathic tendencies had been bred into our bloodlines.

There will be the issue of challenges from those who see me as weak; I need to consolidate my allies, including the unsavory Chief Hunters I turned. The United Nations promised to get Usliff and Ilthiss to stand down, though given their lust for power, I can't imagine how.

I wished that I could be a part of the Sapient Coalition's activities, but the prey races weren't ready for diplomatic contact with the Arxur. These deep wounds would take generations to heal; there was nothing I could offer that would atone for my complicity—every atrocity I committed to survive. Forgiveness would never be something I deserved, for all my efforts to bring about a new dawn.

Humanity had escaped the label of monstrous predators, yet obligate carnivores with our past wouldn't be immune to judgment. Felra was an unmerited blessing: the only friend I ever had, and my only outlet for my suppressed emotions. While the Dossur didn't belong in strategy meetings, I hoped to consult with her on sentimental matters, in Vysith's role.

Hey Siffy! How'd your conversation with Zhao go? Felra's message came through in an instant, across the reinstated FTL networks. *I know you're going to be a great leader. You have such a big heart!*

I tapped my claws against the keypad. *Zhao needs to handle Usliff and Ilthiss before we talk. Those two wanted a larger role, despite the obsolescence of their methodology. We cannot afford coups, in-fighting, and power grabs, yes?*

With you finding a way to feed them and not killing lots of people, I think you'll be well-received! You just need to promise greatness in a way that's not keeping cattle. You did the right thing by forcing Giznel to free all sapient captives, before he left. The lab-grown meat will be fine; you know, Arxur can try beef jerky now!

That is not real meat, you silly rodent. You cannot even tell that human meat is *meat by looking at it, because it is so processed and unnatural. That is not a dietary practice befitting a hunter.*

Maybe you don't realize the grays do things boringly, Felra fired back. *I'm serious, Siffy, your culture needs to be more fun. Fun is part of expressing yourself.*

I question the validity of any advice coming from you.

But you'll still listen to me: because I'm that much fun! What would you do without me? Practice your sulking expression in the mirror?

Hmph. I do not have to listen to your babbling. I can turn off the holopad.

You don't want to do that! You must be lonely, not having Olek and Lisa around anymore.

*I am not lonely; I am**relieved****. No more spies and conspiracy theories. I feel bad for that poor adopted human on Skalga, who'll have to deal with Olek's derangement again. And I'm sure you'll see enough of Lisa to tell me things I don't care about, since she transferred to Liberty's Bastion*.

I know! The coffee shop has been set in motion. Actually, I told her to put a drink on the menu called the Siffy! She can use food coloring to make it gray, and draw a BIG heart shape with the cream.

I thoroughly despise you. Never contact me on this app again, Felra.

Right, sure. Always so grumpy.

I am not grumpy; I am just tired of you! Enjoy this, because it's the last time I'll ever respond to your messages.

Okay then. Talk to you tomorrow!

I considered deleting the SwiftPair app after the latest exchange with Felra, but settled for burying the holopad in its drawer with an exasperated tail lash. If that Dossur was the best candidate to steer us down an emotional awakening, perhaps it was better if we kept our single-minded focus on war. I didn't want to be anything like *that.* Hopefully, the Secretary-General's message, arriving any minute, would offer better prospects for the Arxur's future. Unifying my people under a novel purpose was my mission, and that meant I needed rival Chief Hunters mollified.

I intended to ditch the authoritarian name, Dominion, during my rule, and to lay the groundwork for a new method of government; one where the rights spelled out in the Sapient Coalition's founding documents were mirrored for our citizens. The herbivores needed to be convinced we didn't deserve extinction, and showing them intended reforms might give Zhao something to work with. I believed that humanity would fulfill their end of the bargain: that promise to aid the rebellion following the Kolshians' fall. That might not be by sending their fleet, after Giznel's pathetic surrender, but staying the guns of their allies would be its own fight.

My claw was hovering over the comms screen, and I swiped to accept when Zhao phoned. "Greetings, Mr. Secretary-General. From your relaxed expression, I gather that your discourse with Ilthiss and Usliff went well?"

"It did. They were given roles as chief generals—a fancy way of saying military advisors—and told that they'd need to prove themselves willing to play by humanity's rules before we'd back their leadership. That you have seniority, and showed your strength the best at Aafa. We framed it as a promotion, higher than the

single sector they had before," the black-haired human replied, a subtle grin on his lips. "I assume that you have the officers who defected from the start under your control. They were already willing to follow you."

"There's an understanding," Kaisal chimed in, from where he'd been pretending not to notice my discourse with Felra. "We're withdrawing from the sectors like you asked, now that the cattle are released and the raids will stop. A few of the defectives will spearhead new colonies, for the suddenly returning soldiers. Others will take regional roles as governors. The more self-serving parties have been relegated to military training."

I narrowed my eyes. "Yes. I suspect the Sapient Coalition will call for us to unconditionally rid ourselves of our military capacity, but I will not agree to that. We must be able to defend ourselves, should some prey take the initiative to try to wipe us out. Also, if I acquiesce to such demands, my leadership will be viewed as weak—and doomed."

"I'm confident that I can bargain for you to be left to your own devices, as long as you agree to isolation within Wriss' twenty-lightyear bubble. It'll take some convincing, but after everything you've done for humanity, I promise not to undermine your future. I believe you can be an instrument, to build something better. The United Nations will be here to offer guidance, as well as to help you navigate budding diplomatic relations, every step of the way."

"I suppose that you've heard that the Yotul offered us an embassy. I hope I did not cause offense, but I have not accepted the offer. It seems unwise for herbivores to reside on Wriss at this time, especially for if…I cannot guarantee that diplomats wouldn't become dinner."

"That's why the Yotul extended that offer prior to the UN, though it's amusing that they beat us to the punch. Isif, we recognize the extraordinary complications that you find yourself with; you need time to sort your affairs out. We'll conduct relations virtually and directly, until you have time to train a corps of diplomatic intermediaries—who can be sensitive to other races' customs. I suggest you respond to the Technocracy's offer with, 'Not yet.'"

"I will. At least that means you already have one vote against wiping us out."

“Two. Ambassador Tarva will advocate for you; I trust we can pressure Veln into giving her some independence, for the treaty votes.”

“I cannot believe that the Governor lost her seat of power. She was a formidable ally on the side of humanity.”

“Don’t discount Tarva, because she still is. Her choice of speakers and testimony about the Venlil’s suffering was instrumental in getting the votes for gene reversal programs—including the one for omnivores. She’s a woman of conviction, regardless of who is on her side.”

“It was my firm belief that Venlil were weak, until I saw the decisions she made on my behalf and yours. You were quite lucky, out of all those indoctrinated squealers, that first contact was with someone so fortuitous. I’m sure Kaisal would seethe to learn how much I respect Tarva.”

The scrawny Arxur lashed his tail. “I do not always agree with Isif’s inclusion of weaklings, but if defectiveness saves us from living as we do now, I will back it. I do not have full trust in you humans, due to your tendency to forsake us. Twice, you rebuffed my attempts to defect to Earth; yet now, I have a life away from war. Acting as Isif’s second, I seek peace and satiety. For…people of my stature not to be tormented.”

After the pure disdain Kaisal showed when first introduced to my social, empathetic companions, it was a relief that he’d come around to backing my cause. He was a solid representation of the average anti-Betterment rebel. There would be many Arxur citizens who carried resentment, or who continued practices that humanity would view as uncivilized; gradual progress was all that I could hope for. Tarva served as a cautionary tale of how a populace could reject sharp changes in a short timeframe. The fact that the average denizen would *have* the option to push back against demands from on high, and an accurate accounting of what happened in their government, would improve on Dominion policy.

There’ll still need to be enforcement of the rule of law; we need to expedite the building of meat factories, and acquisition of non-sapient livestock, to guarantee that.

Secretary-General Zhao clasped his hands together. “Well, I don’t expect any serious hiccups at tomorrow’s summit. You have the

support of your people, judging by Kaisal's attitude. After their showing at Aafa, I don't expect the Betterment archetypes to go against the grain. Congratulations, Isif, on your new role and your bright future. It's been a long time coming; you risked your hide to earn it. I look forward to diplomatic relations between our planets in quiet times."

"Wait, Míngzé? As a final matter, I seek your opinion on my new government's nomenclature, replacing the harsh tyranny associated with the old one. Dominion should be lost to time," I said. "The Arxur Collective is my idea. I thought it a suitable name, yes?"

"The Arxur Collective. It's a daring premise to live up to, but it does have a nice ring to it. It evokes that hope, that your people can work in altruistic cooperation and care for each other once more. One for all."

"Everything I do will be for the good of the people. What do you humans say? Lead by example?"

"It's the only way to lead and stand for something. You seem to have discovered your emotional side just fine, without any prehistoric Arxur as a lighthouse. I'm proud to have worked alongside you, Isif. You proved me *very* wrong about your people."

"You proved me right about yours. Thank you for sticking up for us, after we have done our part. And thank you for defeating the conspiratorial tyrants that perpetuated this war."

"We couldn't have done it without you, Isif. Your fortitude and compassion has saved countless lives, both today and in generations to come. Take care of yourself out there. Enacting lasting change: that'll be a fight we'll tackle for years to come. Our patience may be tested, but the end result is worth the tiring journey."

"Wriss is free; that alone makes every risk I've taken worth it. If no future Arxur will endure the shame I feel, for every meal I've eaten and crime I've sown, then I will fight until my dying breath. I hope you know you've succeeded Meier's wisdom with more grace and intellect than Earth could've hoped for. Farewell, Secretary-General Zhao."

"Good luck, my friend."

I terminated the video call, allowing him to return to planning for a busy session of post-war decisions. Kaisal turned his binocular eyes

to the viewport, with the glint I finally recognized as homesickness vanishing. The reds of Wriss' clay masses, and the greens of forests and plains, stretched out on the viewport. I was optimistic, as we prepared for the landing that would start my reign. Though Felra would be far away, I wouldn't be alone among my people—Kaisal would require continued mentoring, and I could form a social network within the Collective's fledgling bureaucracy. There was no longer an entity standing in the way of progress; the greatest benefit to Betterment's fall was that I wouldn't have to hide my true persona beneath a horrific farce any longer.

This is home. It can be a place worth saving, worth fighting for. My life can be spent in pursuit of something good, not just with the purpose of staving off execution.

The arrival of a second sapient predator had been the catalyst for the liberation of my entire people. Without humanity, I would've had no empathetic sapients to reach out to who would've seen me as a person. I would've had no frame of reference for what a dignified society would look like, apart from Betterment and the Federation. I would've never known that the two galactic powers were colluding to our detriment, and would've never been connected with the Yotul or the Venlil: a pair of herbivores who could act with cordiality, despite my species. This war couldn't have been won if I hadn't saved Earth from annihilation, and trusted them to defy the odds at Aafa.

Every encouraging moment led back to the Terrans, and our partnership to actualize a shared vision of the future. It might take decades for the wounds on all sides to heal, in any meaningful way, but the cycles of hatred could begin to dissolve today. The humans had given me hope for peace and friendship, and with Wriss under my control, I never planned to let it go.

Chapter 179

Memory transcription subject:*Ambassador Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: April 7, 2137

The past few weeks had been packed with important events, falling alongside the stunning victory at Aafa. With the prototype cure set to be injected into my veins, Noah and I had taken the opportunity to visit Earth after the Skalga referendum. Both of his parents were deceased, but he introduced me to a few of his surviving relatives: an aunt, a second cousin, and a cousin-in-law. Culture in his part of the world was centered on the nuclear family, rather than extended, but everyone I spoke to was proud to be related to an astronaut with such a sterling reputation. We were given a private tour of NASA headquarters—the organization responsible for our meeting. The evening was complete with the promised watching the alien sunset in a hammock, and dining with otherworldly food.

I had been quite impressed with Earth's resilience, and was received warmly by the locals. One comment from a stranger about me being "one of the good ones" confused me, but other than that, I was treated with reverence. To think I'd ever been frightened of these predators, or worried about visiting the homeworld where their numbers were billions. Their enterprising culture was intoxicating, with contrasting places across the globe that could inspire our children. I wondered if Skalga could've cultivated such differences, without the Federation's mellowing. Maybe we still could, with time to shake off their interference. When it was time to stand before my people, as the first to accept a human-engineered serum, I had been ready.

There were no adverse effects that I noticed, as Governor Veln applauded my courage and renounced the Federation. For all the supposed risks, it hadn't been worth fretting; every blood test showed that the counter-edits had taken well, and that everything was as the science predicted. It was a matter of waiting for the next candidates to go through the process, though it was difficult to be patient. When a human scientist reached out to me about locating a donor, I couldn't rush down there quickly enough. However much I'd failed my first daughter, I was stronger now than before—and I

knew Noah would protect our children with his life, too. We were taking the initial steps to transforming the Venlil, back into a fearsome, unyielding race.

Now that I'm expecting a child, Noah has been all but falling over himself to help me. He's trying to do everything for me; it's like he thinks I'll break at a gust of wind! We still have six months to go.

The astronaut smiled softly at me, while wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "The Treaty of Sol: signed unconditionally by Chief Maronis, before we ever penned the terms. How do you feel, trying to bring about lasting peace?"

"All I ever wanted was for you to have the right to exist. I want the same for us now. I know there's still a lot of work to be done, picking up the pieces of the Federation…an organization that stood centuries. Humanity needs to find a path for your era to last just as long. So many complications, parties, and old wounds that could impede progress," I answered.

"We've made it this far, and don't forget, we're persistence predators. We will dedicate ourselves to this role, as mediators, for as long as it takes. There's so much reason for hope. Herbivores cohabitating with humans beyond even Skalga. Earth, staving off extinction time and again, against all odds. Truth and reason prevailing over fear and ignorance, despite the fact it took centuries. *The Duerten Shield* showing up to our treaty signing. You and I, throwing off the Federation's influence with our lovely family."

"You're right. I am surprised to see Ambassador Coji, looking all repentant. Hopefully, she won't make us regret delaying these proceedings until her faction arrived."

"The Duerten Shield might've used a lot of their bombs in the battle, but they still have ships in orbit. We've been able to stall for a while, under our claim that we're doing a thorough job thumbing through prisoners, shadow caste citizens, information, and asylum-seekers alike. However, with food dwindling and no supply chain, they won't wait much longer for the green light. We need to sort out what we do with Aafa as the first item on our list."

"After what happened to Kalqua, I don't know how Zhao plans to talk them down. I'd hate for humanity to shoot the Duerten ships, just when we're finally making progress."

“We don’t need more enemies; let’s hope it won’t come to that. I think we’re going to find out the Secretary-General’s plans now.”

Noah hovered beside me at the Venlil station, and his brown eyes turned to the podium. Zhao was mounting the stage with methodical footsteps; the borrowed tradition of applause greeted him, this time with rousing fervor. The Sapient Coalition members chose to stand beside humanity, despite the mismatch on paper, and were thrilled that we had come out on top. Earth’s cunning, daring efforts were both appreciated and respected, so it went unquestioned that the United Nations was taking charge in these proceedings. If these diplomats were told a year ago that they’d be delighted at the fall of the Federation, by the hands of new predators, it would’ve been unthinkable. I felt pride to be sitting among an array of species, with peers who could devote ourselves to peace without interference.

My choice to befriend humanity will save trillions of future lives, and liberate the galaxy from tampering and oppression. Perhaps there were things we could’ve done better—sacrifices we wish we didn’t have to make—but I wouldn’t abandon the Terrans for the universe.

Zhao raised his hands in a humble gesture, as the praise continued. “Thank you for the warm welcome, friends. As you all know, Kolshian tyranny is no more, with the karmic resolution of the Battle of Aafa. While this meeting is about progress, and how we move forward to better days, I’d like to take a moment to look back at all that we’ve lost. Recent revelations showed how easy it is to rewrite history; we have a mandate to learn from the past, even with its darkest moments. Let us have a moment of silence for the innocent lives lost on Earth, and every other world that suffered from raiders—Nishtal, the cradle, Kalqua—and many others throughout the centuries.”

The chamber fell into a hushed silence, with many diplomats recalling a loved one taken as cattle and attacks on several worlds. I recalled what it was like to decide to pull the life support on my daughter, and the looks in the humans’ eyes at Earth’s memorial service, before the bomb that removed my tail. Noah placed a hand atop my prosthetic, as it tightened around his wrist. The choked quietness was broken only by the occasional cough and sniffle; there was a collective weight to the loss, with all of us gathered there. When the Secretary-General deigned to break the silence, it

was a merciful reprieve from those heavy emotions.

“So much senseless slaughter, just in the short time we’ve been an active force in space. It is why the items on my agenda are all related to dealing with our enemies, active and subdued, then followed by establishing protocols for diplomacy with powers outside our circle. There will be plenty of time for us to find our footing, and sort out what kind of organization the SC will be. My sole demand inside our borders is a simple one, anyway: that the Sapient Rights document all of you sign is applied, unequivocally, to humans. I want to trust in the safety of our citizens traveling abroad, as we attempt to integrate and spread out,” Zhao said.

Gojid Minister Kiri chewed at her claws. “Despite my repeated directives, it’s difficult to get the exterminators in line. With only a few colonies left, the Gojidi Union is in tatters. You have my word that we’re cracking down on bigotry, and punishing offenders; it would be remiss not to mention that it’ll take time to normalize human residents.”

“I understand that you cannot eliminate all anti-predator radicals. I simply ask for a zero tolerance policy, and for your best efforts to weed out physical mistreatment of humans. I’ll discuss this more at our internal meeting, next week, but the United Nations wishes to open embassies on all SC worlds—and for you to open annexes on our soil as well. We will dedicate entire teams to learning your cultures and strengthening relations, but the same respect will be needed from you, as our partners.”

Nuela, from the Krakotl delegation, raised a tentative wing. “While more Krakotl side with my separatist movement by the day, the traditional government still contests our power. I’m not sure it would be…wise, to grant you an embassy on one of our colonies.”

“Humanity has plans to implement you as the singular Krakotl faction, and back your government in the necessary ways: however, I believe that falls outside the scope of today’s discussion. I’ll be happy to address individual concerns at length next time. For now, let us focus on the fallout of this war, and what we’ll do with our enemies. It’s important to me that we don’t preside over senseless loss of life, and that we make assurances to draw surrenders from the *two hundred plus* Federation subsidiaries. I seek the war’s end, so that humanity can live at peace…so that none of us have to lose

more lives. It's why reducing cities on Aafa to ash is an unacceptable outcome."

"You're trying to stop us from finishing what we came to Aafa for, after we upheld our end of the bargain?" Ambassador Coji squawked. "I helped delay for the sake of your investigation, and now, you're changing our agreement?"

"We have a proposal that we believe fulfills our agreement, while sparing those who had no say or role in Kalqua's attack. We've rounded up the millions of shadow caste members, and transported them painstakingly to a habitable exoplanet in an unclaimed system. We'll transfer them into the Shield's custody, no questions asked, in exchange for Aafa being spared. Whatever it is you want to do to the people responsible, that's at your discretion. This is much more efficient and accurate than dropping what bombs you have left on civilians; it is justice against the perpetrators. What do you think?"

"In those shiplog recordings, you said that you would hunt every conspirator down. That the bombs would miss the people responsible…who *were* hiding underground. I suppose this arrangement is suitable, but I don't want the entire Kolshian race to be roaming the stars like they did nothing! And what about their colonies?"

"Chief Maronis relayed orders for them to stand down, and self-destruct any remaining ships. We surveyed the colonies through extensive scans, for any hideouts or suspicious activity. You all heard the Chief's faulty rationale about predator disease, on our videos; we can combat his misinformation, now that we have the truth. Each of your offices should've received an extensive packet of research about prion diseases that exist on Earth, as well as their modes of transmission and behavior. With their purpose invalidated, the Commonwealth are nothing. They will be sequestered and surveilled for some time."

Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen tilted his head. "Have you acquired any of these prions for the Galactic Institute of Medicine to study, and confirm your findings? Why did the Kolshians never discover the infectious agent, despite years of study?"

"I believe it's near impossible that we'll find anything. To our knowledge, prions can only survive for a few years in soil and water

—it's been centuries. Contaminated grounds were isolated, and the water was treated with strict enough conditions to eliminate the proteins; ironically enough, sustained high temperatures are the only way we know to kill those things. By burning the corpses, the Kolshians killed the microbes, and by the time they had the means to detect the cause, they'd succeeded in eradicating it. Now, are there any objections to our plans for Aafa?"

"How long do you intend for them to be surveilled?" the Thafki ambassador piped up.

"Years. We'll install a rebel government that operates under UN authority. Perhaps every half-decade, they'll be up for parole; we can evaluate their societal transformation. Regardless of if they're allowed to engage in some capacity, they won't have a fleet as long as this war is in living memory. The Kolshians need to prove their species' good intentions, to atone for an era."

The Secretary-General's eyes roved over the crowd, searching for any further objections. Punitive actions against the shadow fleet would be a start; I hoped the Duerten rendered agony upon all of the conspirators. I wished the Terrans had handed over the Farsul elders they'd taken hostage, so that their trial would be a bit less civilized—for everything they'd done to species *45-G.* It was ironic that the humans and the Venlil were both above-average on aggression and emotionality, like our neighboring planets had evolved to be the closest pals. As much as they wanted to mend bridges, I hoped the predators would take the gravity of our injuries into consideration. Skalga would need an adequate plan spelled out for all hostile parties, especially for how Talsk would be handled.

Locking the Farsul homeworld in a "Kessler cage" was an impenetrable imprisonment, but if we can fully finish this war with the Treaty of Sol, there needs to be a long-term solution. They should be sequestered for just as long as the Kolshians, with their role of deciding how to alter other races. Historians and archaeologists, my ass.

Zhao smiled, unmasked in this speech. "I'm happy we could reach an accord, Ambassador Coji. I'm saving talks about most neutral parties for later, but I'd like to continue our military alliance with the Duerten Shield—a full-fledged mutual pact. While the handling of non-aggressors was the last item on my agenda, let me spare a moment to say humanity doesn't extend our embassy plan just to

the Sapient Coalition. We'd like embassies on every Shield world, and for your parties to come to Earth. Our relations don't need to be so frosty."

"We wish to remain separate entities from the Coalition, rather than to join you. However, opening our doors to human diplomats should be acceptable," Coji answered.

"Excellent. I'm grateful for every friend we can find in the stars. It's a shame that there is a long list of parties who've aggrieved us, siding with the Federation. The top of the list, as I'm sure the listeners are waiting for me to get to, is the Farsul. We were unable to devote the manpower to an occupation of Talsk, and that remains true, even after the war ends. What we must do is monitor them, to ensure they don't build anything, and we can't do that without any ship traffic or sensor contact. The blockade must come down."

I lashed my tail in irritation. "The Venlil Republic wishes for the species who crippled us to remain in isolation. Unlike the Kolshians, the Farsul civilians had an idea of what was going on. Founder's Day, a festival where they sold our artifacts back to us, was a community effort—it's a glaring example of the rot at their heart. Respectfully, I don't see a reason why we'd let any of them out, any time soon."

There were a few murmurs of agreement from the gathered diplomats. Noah knitted his brows together beside me, seemingly worried by me putting a voice to my government's position of vengeance. While it was Veln's official stance that the Farsul's alterations were monstrous, it was obvious I agreed with the idea that our cripplers couldn't get off lightly. Human compassion was something I adored about them, but with an issue this personal, I felt obligated to demand justice. How many years had the Venlil been mocked as the galaxy's weakest species? How many children, like my daughter, had died or been captured, because our paws were tied behind our back? With our natural temperament, we could've fought back against the Arxur.

The Secretary-General's lips twitched with sympathy. "I was there when we told you about our findings at the Archives, Ambassador. Our hearts go out to the Venlil for what was done to you. I reiterate that we do not seek more loss of life, so unless we plan to glass

them, we need to attack their ideology. To show them the error of their ways. Keeping Talsk totally cut off, as a form of collective punishment, will serve to radicalize civilians. We won't change hearts and minds like that. We won't rid their planet of Federation methods and propaganda, so this *system* will live on."

"Where was the resistance on Talsk?" I fired back. "You can't rid them of something with no pushback. This isn't about innocent people."

"You're right. The Farsul aren't innocent, not most of them. They don't realize they're doing anything wrong. But if there's one person—maybe a child—that's innocent, then it's worth it to try to fix it. None of this will be easy, since change and healing take years, decades. I know it's not easy to think of ever forgiving a wound as grave as what was inflicted on your species…just as we still feel rage for Earth. This is about the big picture, for our children and our children's children."

"Mr. Secretary-General, I'm more willing to tolerate the very Arxur who ordered the raid than these monsters. I want my children to have a bright future, but I cannot forget what was taken from us. The Venlil, and every other species who've had their lives turned upside-down, cannot."

"And you should not. Rest assured, we are *not* just letting the Farsul back into the galaxy, any more than the Kolshians. I propose the same parole system, and without reformation, they will never touch the galaxy again. We'll engineer *one* lane in and out, which will allow us to monitor that they're not building any weapons to disintegrate the cage from the ground. Any traffic will require UN approval, a stringent process reserved for asylum seekers and any needed supplies. I agree that they've lost the right to be a part of our community in this generation. I'm just proposing an action for a far-off day they earn it back."

I stewed over the Terran leader's words for several seconds, sensing the gazes of every diplomat on me. The Sapient Coalition didn't back humanity's decision not to bomb certain worlds, though they went along with it; there was a great deal of anger over centuries of oppression. My mind harkened back to how I'd told Chief Hunter Isif that I could never forgive him for what he'd done, even if I recognized that he was the best bet toward peace. Elias Meier had

offered a dying wish of peace between me and the Arxur, and I'd been moved by it. I could appreciate that Zhao had a similar desire for us to find a way to move forward with the Farsul.

What did Zhao say back at the Summit? "Humanity is willing to give everything of ourselves for peace?" If these sweet predators say that, after everything they've suffered, how can I be a true friend to them without doing the same?

Noah leaned down, whispering in my ear. "The Farsul don't hold power over us anymore. Our children will have everything they took from us, and more. We are going to have a beautiful life. I trust you, Tarva, to do the right thing, even when it isn't easy. Even when your entire world won't agree."

"This is different from trusting a predator race. It's harder." My heart was tight with sorrow, as I answered my beloved in a hushed tone; it was about more than doing a moral, yet unpopular, deed. It was trusting humanity, one final time, to act in our best interests. "I want you to have the peace and harmony you desire. If I believe the Arxur can change, I guess the Farsul deserve the same chance. I know you'll never let anything happen like that to us again."

"We'll be your guardians. There will be nothing stronger than our love and our kindness together. You can count on that."

"I know, Noah." Tears welled in my eyes, as I straightened up to give Zhao an answer. "The Venlil Republic would like personal updates from the UN on all matters regarding the Farsul's handling. I ask for this as a personal favor, though I will put aside my own feelings either way."

The Secretary-General ducked his head. "With how much the Venlil have been affected, that's a fair request; we'll see that you're kept in the loop. Thank you for working with us here. I can see that emotions are, understandably, running high, so I suggest we take a ten-minute recess, and clear our minds before tackling the back half of our agenda. We'll reconvene for the rest of the items then."

Chatter rose up as soon as the predator stepped back from the microphone. Noah was staring at me with a mix of pride, and also concern, perhaps that my stress levels would affect the baby. I allowed him to guide me out of the room; his hands grabbed a tissue from a table, and he dabbed at my eyes lightly. There was a question swirling in his pupils, even while he focused on comforting

me. I made a mental note to ask him what was on his mind later. For now, my focus needed to be on keeping my composure, and engaging with the final aspects of our peacetime accord.

Humanity could count on my cooperation, as well as my unwavering attention, as they sought to wrap up the treaty convention.

Chapter 180

Memory transcription subject:*Ambassador Tarva of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: April 7, 2137

As I turned to stroll back into the auditorium for Zhao's resumption, I noticed that Noah hadn't followed me. Immediate concern blossomed in my heart, knowing how unusual that was. Ever since I'd begun my pregnancy, the astronaut had stuck close to me, like I was a fragile object that might fall apart, if left unattended. Mere moments before, the former Ambassador Williams had been comforting me after the Farsul topic stirred up my sorrow for my species. Was the human having sudden medical complications? I whirled around to check on him, and found that the predator had inexplicably lost his footing.

Noah was hunched over on one knee, extending a velvet box in his hands. His binocular eyes peered up at me with love and sincerity; he popped open the container to reveal a metal band, with a sparkling gemstone atop it. I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding what the predator was up to. Was this some Terran ritual I was unfamiliar with? Despite my lack of recognition, I could sense the charged aura of emotion between us. The astronaut's lips curved upward, as he gave voice to the unspoken question that had been in his mind.

"Tarva, nobody has ever made me feel as complete and sure-footed as you. You are my world, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?" the human rumbled.

"W-what?" The tears that had been spilling from sorrow renewed, but this time, it was from an overpowering deluge of love. It seemed this was a tradition for how the predators *proposed* to their loved ones; Noah wanted a commitment, to uphold our relationship until our final days. "Yes. Yes! I can't wait to start a family together, as husband and wife."

The human rose and clasped my wrist with a gentle hand, before carefully sliding the ring onto my toe. It felt a bit strange and tight, but it must be some sort of symbol of commitment. I'd seen humans wearing similar objects before, and come to think of it, all of them

were in long-term relationships. We hadn't talked about marriage rituals between our two species at all, though I was sure we'd have plenty of time to plan and mingle our traditions. When my ex-husband proposed to me many years ago, it was with the storied tail signs of "Marry me." The ceremony was our traditional fusion of the families, where relatives and friends symbolically swapped sides between bride and groom.

I commit to this union, two souls merging as one. The goals of the other are my goals, and their desires are my desires. I will stoke the fires of love in rain and sunshine; I will rebuild it from ashes or cinders. For the remainder of our lives, we will move forward together, the Venlil vows read.

I hadn't fulfilled the letter of my first promise, after the devastation of our daughter's death made it impossible to spark anything from the ashes. With Noah, I believed I had a chance to start again—to live up to those vows. It would be not just the merging of souls, but the merging of two cultures; I intended to integrate Terran customs with Venlil rites. The words should amount to supporting my human through both hardships and good times. Together, after all we'd been through since first contact, I knew we could make it through anything.

"I'll tell you all about our traditional weddings…we can swap stories, so that we're clear what marriage means between us," Noah growled. "For now, we need to get back to the meeting. I just couldn't wait a second longer to ask you."

I nuzzled up to his side, as we ambled back to the auditorium. "Unless your weddings are solitary affairs, we definitely need to think of a guestlist. Family, friends, and people we've worked closely with?"

"Yeah, I'd like to limit it to those close to us. Just don't ask Glim. I wish him well, and I've directed him to get help, but he made it personal by selling us out. I know he thinks we betrayed him first by letting Isif speak, and he's…a very traumatized man, but he spat on our love. I don't want to work with him, and I *certainly* don't want him at our wedding."

"I agree; what he did burned bridges between us. I imagine that means, just for appearances, we should make sure Sara Rosario doesn't bring Haysi. Sara belongs at our wedding, and I'm happy

that she and Haysi have stayed close…but besides not sticking it to Glim, we don't want anyone there who might diss *predator traditions."*

"That means we're definitely not inviting Coji, regardless of how much she's changed."

"Why not? I think it'd be hilarious for her to cut you off at each word of our vows."

"Hilarious is one word to describe it. I can think of another, but it's not very diplomatic. Anyway, it looks like Zhao's about ready to resume his speech, so we can hammer out every detail on the ride back to Skalga. I'm right here, if you need any support over the Farsul or the war—just reach out, and *don't* over exert yourself! Please."

"I'll control my stress levels, for the baby."

"And yourself."

"And myself. Don't worry, Noah, I'm fine."

The astronaut steadied my chair as I sat back down, while I tried to focus on the Secretary-General despite my giddiness and excitement. There were serious matters to attend to, and I couldn't afford to be distracted; however, the prospect of marrying my soulmate had caused my earlier pain, over the Farsul discussions, to evaporate. I was ready to tackle difficult subjects with a clear mind, and to iron out the final details of peacetime. Whatever put an end to the war and the death, with humanity ushering in a harmonious era, I could live with it.

What's left for Zhao to discuss, aside from the two-hundred Federation powers? The Dominion? I wonder how Isif's rebellion has held up…and whether humanity finds it appropriate, for the Arxur to be punished at all for their unthinkable cattle farms.

The Secretary-General's eyes swept across the room, ensuring every diplomat had time to filter back in. "Alright then. Before I fully move past the Farsul issue, I want to raise two topics I intended to broach in our internal meetings—to emphasize that we hate our friends' suffering, and that we intend to address every issue discovered from the Archives. You know about the gene reversals, but we haven't gone over our 'Project Chronicle.' In short, we're recruiting historians to sort the data from each species' chamber."

“Only human historians?” Laulo, the Yotul ambassador, called out with suspicion. “I trust your people, but I don’t want more aliens handling our history. Respectfully.”

“Of course, and at our internal meeting, we’ll be discussing what each individual race sees as important and wants in their curricula. We’ll be requesting professionals from your planets to work with us, and ensure that everything is fair and aboveboard. What we’ve started on is…*incentivizing* some archivist prisoners to help us, and large-scale sorting. I intend to involve each of you in your own stories. Humanity’s commitment is to undoing not just the gene mods, but every lie they’ve ever told you. Please understand that.”

I flicked my ears, recognizing that Zhao was addressing me. “I do, and I’m grateful for your efforts to expose the conspiracy for all of their crimes against sapience. Truly. They won’t control us.”

“They won’t be out abducting potential uplifts either. I recognize that some member states have welcomed back citizens from the past—who could be helpful with Project Chronicle. I recommend using them as windows to a lost era, but also setting out provisions to address their…unique circumstances. We recognize both the benefits and the dangers of advanced cryotechnology, and intend to discuss laws on cryopod usage next week. We take what they’ve done quite seriously.”

Mazic President Cupo flared his trunk. “Then destroy the technology! Nothing good can come of preserving sapients like frozen fruit, for *hundreds of years.*”

A few calls of assent came from the gathered diplomats, and I found myself wondering if Cupo was right. The abductees who’d been transported into our time had difficulty adjusting, and lost their lives and their families. There were zero positives to rendering people obsolete on their own worlds. Cryopods would facilitate similar experiments done by anyone who bought into Federation ideology, and tried to reinstitute the cure on live subjects. If even Zhao recognized the potential dangers, why not just outlaw cryopod usage in our territory?

The Terran leader cleared his throat. “There are many valid concerns, but technology is often a double-edged sword—that is to say, it can be used for good or for evil. If someone has a terminal disease, and chooses to be preserved until a cure is found, cryopods

may save lives. It could allow astronauts to hibernate through long voyages. Even with warp drives, it would take vast amounts of time and supplies to travel to neighboring galaxies. It takes years just to cross the full breadth of our own. We can have this debate at length at our next meeting, where I'll lay out scientific research on the positives this tech might achieve."

"Very well. We will listen to your arguments then," Cupo acknowledged.

"That's all I ask. Now, let us move on from the issues surrounding Talsk, and address what we should do with the rest of the Federation. As you know, the UN launched a cyberattack on all Kolshian-aligned principalities. Let me preface this by saying that this was the move that won the war; if those two hundred parties had come to Aafa, we would've been slaughtered. However, the cyberattacks had the regrettable consequence of civilian loss of life, due to socioeconomic collapses."

The Dossur diplomat, Alar, twitched his whiskers. "These species picked their sides, and they supported the Kolshians after everything. The Federation didn't regret picking off Dossur civilians —some of whom were only just recovered from the shadow caste's basement, in terrible condition."

"The treatment of the captives from Mileau was criminal, and worsened by the fact that it was simply for standing with humanity. However, I reiterate our desire to limit loss of life, and not to radicalize civilians; we seek healing. We want these two-hundred-plus parties to surrender, so that we're not forced into this war any longer. That means that we're willing to send humanitarian aid and put the lights back on, for anyone who capitulates. It's also important to note that not all Federation members are in the same category."

"Forgive the interruption," Coji began, with unusual tact, "but how so? I just heard Ambassador Alar point out that they supported the Kolshians after everything—including the attacks on Mileau *and* Kalqua."

"The Duerten Shield originally hesitated to side with humanity, due to fears of opposing the Kolshians. Kalqua shows that there *was* true peril in challenging the shadow caste. Many parties were afraid of retribution, if they broke away from the Federation. There were

quite a few who voted for neutrality, after Noah's speech, but didn't want to hop sides. You were in that same position once, Coji."

"I…concede that point. I believe I once told a Venlil counterpart that it was hard to stick our necks out. It was why talks with humanity hadn't achieved results before us."

"Precisely. For parties that weren't involved as aggressors, I believe we can come to terms. Their existence as neutral powers doesn't threaten us. Honestly, if they so desire, I don't feel this changes anything about our diplomatic efforts before. We still wish to sway potential friends. This might open the door to new members of the Sapient Coalition, should they seek that avenue in good faith."

"Um, what about the ones who…don't act in good faith? Who acted against the SC?" Tilfish Governor Birla hesitated, recalling how her species had once been a hostile power. "I recognize the value of parole and second chances, after Sillis has received one. However, not everyone can…be trusted, or should escape punishment."

The Harchen ambassador raised an appendage in support. "I don't speak in defense of Fahl's actions any more than Birla stands by what the Tilfish did. I agree that we should separate those who helped from those who were captive bystanders. Yet the truth is, there are true fanatics in the Federation. Many of these people have had ample opportunity to break from the ideology, but couldn't even see anything wrong with…omnivores' treatment."

"Humanity is aware of the aggressors, such as the Malti; a species who'd practice orbital exterminations on sapients, at the Kolshians' behest, and see it as a normal military duty. We're informed about the most concerning subset, the 'fanatics' as you say. The difficult aspect of these is religion, something the Federation tailored to control worlds—something seen in many cultures, such as the Gojids' Great Protector, the Krakotl's Inatala, or the Iftali's Consecrated Order."

"Why don't they see from the Archives that their religion is a lie?" an Iftali diplomat piped up. "Even before we had hard proof, Cilany caught Nikonus bragging about co-opting omnivore religions."

"Hm…for the ones who weren't omnivores, such as the two most… egregious examples, they believed their faith was natural. Even with proof, some wouldn't accept their beliefs as false. The reality is that cultists such as the Yulpa, who have actively *sought* human

sacrifices, or the Drezjin, who worship the Federation as divine avatars, will fight to the last. We'd like for absolute peace, yet these races must be treated as hostiles."

"Are you going to wipe them out?" the Takkan representative asked.

"We don't seek extinction, but the only solution we see is to rebuild their society, from the ground up. We don't wish to allocate troops for an occupation, or to directly engage more than needed. We'll ramp up cyberattacks, forcing them back to the technological drawing board; we'll target their leadership, religious and political. Then, we drop pamphlets and combat misinformation, in the hopes of an eventual surrender. It may take years, and after we've had time to recover, we may need to kickstart change by force."

Zurulian Prime Minister Braylen raised a paw. "So the war's not ending?"

"Not altogether, but the threat to our safety is finished. There will still be cleanup for years to come; even on our own turf, we'll be rebuilding Kalqua, Earth, Nishtal, the cradle, and many more through titanic efforts. I regret that this is the only way to bring peace to the SC. This is seeking the path of least violence, yet it's still an ugly one that forces the compromising of our morals. We've done the best we could to adhere to our ethics, while staving off enemies who don't afford us any rights. I take no joy in the suboptimal choices we've been left with on several occasions."

There were no ensuing challenges from the assembled diplomats, while Zhao shuffled his notes. It was obvious that the final enemy, the one who'd yet to be addressed, was the Arxur Dominion: the carnivores who had terrorized us for centuries. Isif had offered a non-aggression pact during his speech at the Summit, but some diplomats had been quite vocal about his species not deserving a continued existence. Either that conversation and the Nikonus-Giznel video had a lingering effect on the Coalition, or humanity would have to dig their heels in if they wished to spare their troublesome ally.

I'm willing to fight with Governor Veln, despite his undoubted concerns about how the public will react to him "tolerating" the grays. As long as Isif keeps to himself, and that his kind is punished at the first instance of…reverting to old ways, I'll vote to allow it.

“I’ll gloss over the unaffiliated Sivkit Grand Herd, who never reestablished diplomatic connections with us or the Federation. If they want to be isolationist, after learning the truth, we should respect that and leave them alone,” Zhao explained. “So that leads me to the ‘elephant in the room’, which is the Arxur. The Dominion surrendered after their humiliation, and there’s a new government now. As I recall, after Isif’s speech, certain diplomats believe that we’re *partial* to predators, and you have staunch stances on not treating an Arxur as a person. Many of you have trauma…some of you have even lost your homeworlds to their raids. Let me say, I don’t expect you to forgive or forget.”

The Thafki diplomat’s silver-gray ears twitched with anger. “We had no world to ourselves, until you helped us carve something out. There were 12,000 of us in the wild, until you freed millions of our cattle…millions of damaged, battered, broken people, just like those who have strained other worlds’ resources with their predator-diseased states. The Arxur shouldn’t be left alone, to do whatever they like without supervision! If you’re not going to kill them, take away their damn ships.”

“Their bombers ravaged Nishtal; something humanity played a role in. You know what the Arxur do with their ships,” Nuela squawked.

Gojid Minister Kiri flicked her claws. “Isif presided over the raid that left the cradle in ashes, and my species as a mix of sparse colonists and refugees.”

“I understand how they feel,” I whispered to Noah. “Isif was responsible for *that* raid, targeted at Venlil schools. My little girl would be alive if not for him. I was willing to work with him, but with the war over, he shouldn’t keep his bombers. Those aren’t used for good.”

The astronaut grimaced. “I can’t imagine the grief, and I don’t know how you put it aside to cooperate with Isif at all. Nobody would’ve blamed you for wanting outright revenge. I won’t tell you to change how you feel. I wish we lived in a galaxy where everyone could disassemble their bombers, us included. War is hell.”

The argument raged on, with the Thafki ambassador Telikinn’s voice growing more heated. “They view the Thafki as a delicacy! I don’t care if the Kolshians let it happen; the Arxur still did it. They should be locked in a ‘Kessler’ cage at a minimum. They can’t be

trusted, and I certainly don't foresee opening relations with a race that remembers eating us."

Laulo strained on his hindlegs. "The Arxur were quite helpful at Mileau and Kalqua. Our commanders were able to establish a cordial, working relationship with Isif, who helped save prey lives by the billions. I have no reason to believe he'd want to raid or eat anyone. He risked his own head to bring about the opposite, and expressed remorse to us."

"This is about a better future!" I shouted, deciding that the Yotul couldn't argue for Isif alone. "Isif always wanted that. He said something quite powerful to me long ago, that, 'One can be both a victim and an oppressor.' That is what that Arxur is. To everyone's surprise, we now know that the grays are capable of empathy, so I stress giving them a chance to change, just like the galaxy's other monsters."

"Their entire culture is based in cruelty," Cupo challenged. "If that's not evil at every level, what is?"

Secretary-General Zhao tapped the microphone. "That is enough! Nobody is expected to even think about forgiving the Arxur for generations, but we also *know* they were warped into monsters. The United Nations has every intention of monitoring them, and forcing them to live by civilized standards. Without purposeful starvation, there's no reason for raids. Isif was crucial in liberating cattle, overthrowing the Dominion, and gathering allies against Aafa. Despite his past, we can't argue that we owe him our victory."

"If there's no reason for them to raid, why can't you *take away their bombers?* Keep them out of our space!" Telikinn yelled.

"We have negotiated terms to keep the Arxur out of our space—in a twenty-lightyear bubble, leaving the SC be. The Dominion's cruelty-based legacy means that Isif will be seen as weak, without maintaining a military. His government, the one that wants change, would collapse, so it's a necessity to allow him to keep his fleet. It's all for show; the UN will police him. Should the bombers vacate their territory, we have multiple cyberweapons ready to destroy the fleet. If Isif can't be trusted, he won't get past the SC's welcome mat. Will that satisfy you?"

"Not really. However, nonaggression is an upgrade over our… former circumstances. We'll trust humanity to handle it, for now,

but we'll be watching them closely ourselves."

"The United Nations welcomes assistance monitoring all powers confined to their territory, not just the Arxur; we don't trust them ourselves." Zhao was hasty to pivot away, not allowing any further debate over his chosen resolution to Isif. He'd baited Telikinn into agreeing so smoothly, that other SC members might not realize it. "That settles everything. We're quite grateful for the cooperation of our allies, to finalize the war's resolution, with the Treaty of Sol. I look forward to discussions of our internal affairs next week, and I wish you all safe travels. Farewell."

As the human leader dismounted the stage, I relished in the knowledge that the centuries-long war was over. The predators had laid out a step-by-step process to steer the galaxy in the right direction, and to handle all parties that fell outside SC bounds. Noah's loving gaze studied me from the periphery, a warm blanket of security that drew my focus back to the band around my foretoe. His fingers traced over the ring's cool metal, which my brain had somehow normalized wearing. With today's ambassadorial duties complete, I didn't have to worry about protecting Venlil-human interests anymore.

My attention could center around our personal life together, with a wedding to plan and two children on the way. Now that I was starting a new family with such a remarkable person, I felt an eagerness for the future that was unmatched by anything I'd experienced before.

Chapter 181

Memory transcription subject:*Captain Sovlin, United Nations Fleet Command*

Date [standardized human time]: April 9, 2137

I wasn't sure what I imagined human funerary traditions would be like. Not too long ago, before I grew close to the gentle-hearted primates, I wouldn't have imagined a predator race would hold sincere burials at all.

Carlos would be laid to rest in a funeral plot all of us chipped in to pay for, right in Tyler's backyard of Columbus, Ohio. It was a small ceremony consisting of people who worked with him in the past, and our ship's crew members, who'd arrived on Earth after a dragged-out journey back from Aafa. Several stops had been made on our voyage home, to unload Kolshian prisoners and drop off passengers at Skalga and Leirn. Per my deceased friend's wishes, we hadn't invited his family, despite how heartbreaking that rift was. The quiet ceremony unfolded with little fanfare, and some human religious figure arrived to say a few words.

Samantha Harris had made the detour to pay her final respects to her longtime companion. Tyler and Onso were watching a virtual livestream, since the two of them had moved to Leirn for the time being. The apartment had been left into my care, though I was told that "ya gotta pay the rent now, Sovlin. Don't ya dare get me evicted." I was surprised by my commanding officer's decision to move away from Earth, and wondered if it was all for his exchange partner's sake. Officer Cardona was never coming back to reclaim his dog from his father? Why wouldn't he want to continue his ramen chef duties, with Hunter and I as roommates?

Overall, it felt good to be back on the predator homeworld, but I hated today's circumstances: knowing that Carlos hadn't seen the return home with us. His body would be lowered into a hole in the ground, with a simple headstone denoting the years he'd been alive. That was what the one person who'd shown me immeasurable kindness was reduced to. A human priest was reading a passage that stated, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted", before offering words of solace. I knew little about how Terran religions compared to Gojid religions, but that sounded like

nonsense.

There's no comfort in a loved one's death. Just pain, loss, and heartache. Mourning is knowing a person is gone, and they took a part of you with them.

Unlike Sam, I'd turned down the opportunity to speak at the funeral; her statement had been a short admission that she missed his kindness. I had no idea what I would've said if I stood before everyone, but I could barely bring myself to be at this ceremony and honor Carlos' life. I could still see the bullet hole in his helmet, and recalled shaking his spacesuit. Too many people that I cared about had been taken in recent months. Ever since the cradle's fall, terrible events had played out before my eyes, all while I tried to atone for my own hatred. I was grateful that Hunter, Vysith, and Aucel were standing beside me, reminding me why I bothered to persist, confront my demons, and seek happier days.

Tears rolled down my face, as the funeral drew to a close; I couldn't wait to bolt from the premises. I thought if I had spoken before the crowd, I would've commented about the lessons Carlos taught me on open-mindedness, and understanding opposing viewpoints. That was how I wished to remember him, not as the embalmed corpse locked in a wooden box. We might've unseated the Federation, but I'd never forget the costs it had required. Regardless of what my plea deal and my conscience had said, there was nothing left for me to give to any war.

I was an old man, who wanted to help his found family navigate their present reality. It was time to make a positive difference in the world, like the humanitarian work Carlos partook in before this all started. That was what the Peacekeepers were truly about, and those were causes that I could put my personal touch on.

"Hey, Baldy." Samantha walked up to me, dabbing at her binocular eyes: watery pupils I'd once thought deceiving, with false emotions. "Wherever our friend is, I hope he's at peace. Too many burials in too short a time frame. I hope you've got something happier on your slate, now that this is over."

I flicked my claws. "I used to think I deserved my suffering. Since I survived instead of Carlos, I'm going to try to find a way to heal myself…and to make a difference in post-war Earth. There's lots of people like my three younglings here, who could use some

guidance. Setting them all up for a bright future is my new mission."

"Fuck, I sure could use some guidance myself. Now that I'm here…I either have to grapple with the fact my home and my family are long gone, or I'll find a way to ship out. There's nobody. Not even Carlos. I could live with running off with the UN if he were here."

"There's no need to leave or go it alone. You can stay here, with us, Sam. You know Earth better than all of us. I know I haven't been your favorite person, but I care about you. I hate seeing grief tear others apart like it did to me. We can have our own family, a support network, right here."

The auburn-haired soldier forced a smile, before, to my surprise, she wrapped me in a fleeting embrace. "Thanks for offering, but I'm sure as fuck not living with the Yanks. Too much soda, guns, and star-spangled bullshit going on here; it'd make putting up with a racist war criminal not even the worst part."

"That's not all America is, any more than you're kangaroos and koalas!" Hunter protested.

"Well I like my kangaroos and koalas, and it beats dealing with Sovlin on a daily basis," Sam responded, pulling away from me. "I'll be fine. Some time to grieve John…it can't hurt any worse. Ah, enough about me. Why don't we say goodbye with some happier news? Like how the fuck you don't have to uphold those *minimum* five years of service?"

I shifted with discomfort on my paws. "I have Marcel's blessing; I reached out to him. He wanted me to…get help before, and he still does. If there's anything I learned, it's that I'm not predator diseased. I have PTSD. I told the UN the truth, and got a statement from Dr. Bahri advising that I was unfit for combat duty. With the war over, they're happy for me to fulfill our pact through *community* service. It's part of their mission."

"Don't I know it. I reckon they want to not just rebuild Earth, but forge our cities into true interplanetary hubs. The UN wants multicultural acceptance, where, once they get past the 'predators scary' phase, aliens feel welcome. Since you've acquired such an… interesting cast, I'm sure you're up for it. If I heard about an Arxur, a Kolshian, and a 1970s human living together, I'd have thought it was a joke."

Aucel kept me positioned between her and Vysith. “I would have too. You should’ve seen how I reacted when Sovlin told me. Living around a gray…it’s a quick way to get over being disgusted by humans.”

“That’s unflattering. My people might be monsters now, but I’m not one of them. I have more in common with the Terrans than the Dominion,” Vysith commented.

To say the living arrangement had been awkward at first would be an understatement. Once the United Nations gave the sign-off to Aucel’s asylum, after learning her relation to the heroic Recel, it’d taken a great deal of convincing about how ancient Arxur had been empathetic and civilized. The female Kolshian was more in line with the belief that humans were the exception to the predator rule; I could understand how long that notion took to work through. There was no telling whether she’d seek a use for her botanist expertise now, perhaps cultivating a garden in predator lands. Helping her adjust to Earth, keeping her safe from humans who didn’t like her citizenship, and coaxing her out of this fear, was the least I could do.

Sometimes, it just takes time to get over things, and I believe Aucel can come around. She’s learning tolerance for how predators live, at their ugliest, by being here. She has a strong moral compass, and she trusts me. Everything we both believed is gone, but we’ll shape something new. Together.

While it was an accomplishment for Aucel to be in the same room as two predators, Vysith and Hunter had both graduated to the next steps of their life. The pre-Dominion Arxur had considered how despondent the other grays found in the Archives were, and decided to set up a support group. With Giznel unseated, the path had opened up for her to join the UN Peacekeepers: something she was leaning toward doing. Her presence on Earth no longer needed to be hidden, because of it being an affront to Betterment. As one of the few members of her species not involved with the atrocities, Vysith could prove Arxur weren’t always monsters to the galaxy.

Hunter Garner was still adjusting to present-day culture and technology, with occasional mishaps that reflected his primitive upbringing; however, his fiduciary field of study wasn’t obsolete. When he approached me about delving into xenoeconomics, I

thought it was the perfect use of his skillset. All of humanity would be exploring that field from scratch, and he'd proven to be quite absorbent to those concepts. As the United Nations opened its doors for trading, there would always be roles for the numerically savvy. I still thought he should change his name if he wanted to do business with herbivores, but that was a moot point.

"While they're arguing about whether Arxur are disgusting, why don't you tell Sam your other service?" Hunter slapped me in the back, right on a large, bald patch devoid of spines. I flinched, not used to direct contact there. "To your people."

I groaned, as Sam fixed me with a quizzical glare. "I'd rather not. Sam will make fun of me, and it's a sore spot."

"I'll let you in on a secret," the Australian soldier replied. "I'll make fun of you no matter what you say, because deep down, you like it. Plus, you owe me for having me call Onso a slur. Spill."

"Ugh, Hunter, now I'm fucked to the Protector's Cloud! Look, when I talked to the UN, I might've gotten them to sign me up for the cure reversal. The first Gojid trials are moving forward this week, and I volunteered. Now, I know what you're thinking about how I hate being a former omnivore, but this is just about the allergy, like Marcel testified to the SC. If I'm living on Earth, I can't die from a whiff of your grossness."

Hunter clapped his hands with delight. "We're going out for burgers after the procedure. Take back that Gojid pride!"

"I don't know how Gojids are rebuilding our culture, and I don't want to be involved with it. After what happened to the cradle, I doubt it'll even be recognizable. I'm *not* proud of my ancestry, even if they were just people. Meat-eaters aren't monsters, sure, but it's still sickening. It's like eating a slab of your…skin!"

"You already watch me eat raw, bloody meat," Vysith commented.

"That's different. You will *die* without that, and I don't 'watch' you. I purposefully turn away, and I wish you'd go do that in a closed room."

"It takes me all of about two seconds to devour those tiny human cuts. Do I need to isolate myself for basic survival functions, just because I'm a *flesh-eater?* I understand you may feel uncomfortable watching an Arxur tear into meat, after what you saw with your

family, but I don't wish for you to feel ashamed of me."

Aucel shuddered. "Being around you during mealtime is so… visceral."

"Hey, it's not her fault that she has fangs that could snap us in half?" I offered, in an uneasy voice. "Though she is terrifyingly capable of killing us with a single bite. It reminds me of certain things."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "And yet our canines were scary. How exactly were *we* going to bite you, and snap you in half?"

"With the power of sass and evil sadism, obviously."

"You make a compelling argument. My sarcasm is a weapon of sass destruction."

"That was a fucking terrible pun," Hunter griped. "He won't even get the rhyme through his translator!"

"That sounds like Sovlin's problem. Seriously, Baldy, I'm not gonna make fun of you; I think it's great you're getting *uncured*. I'm not your shrink, but for what it's worth, I think chowing down on a burger might be a great idea. Not even because you want to switch your diet. One bite is all."

I scowled. "Why the fuck would I do that? I just learned how you get lethal diseases from eating meat!"

"All talk to keep you afraid. Our stuff is monitored, and it's safe. I think you should try meat, just once, to prove the Federation doesn't have power over you. To prove to yourself that you won't change or struggle with *bloodlust*, because you broke your herbivore crap. It's a way to come to terms with what Gojids really are. Maybe…think about it?"

"I don't know. It's eating carcasses, even if it's artificial. I hate what the Kolshians cost my people, and yours, but I don't know if I'll ever do something like that."

"I doubt you thought you'd jump out of a predator spaceship to a moon either. Sometimes, you take the leap anyway. You've come a long way from wishing we'd all go extinct, and bristling up at the sight of me. I wish you the best of luck, *Captain* Sovlin. It was an honor to serve alongside you."

"Likewise. Don't be a stranger, Sam."

My surviving guard ducked her head, awakening me to the reality that I was no longer a prisoner: not to my life, not to my genes, not to my guilt over Marcel and the cradle, not to the United Nations, and certainly not to the Federation. I was free to live my life however I pleased, whether that was down the path of burned flesh patties or not. Hunter's amber eyes twinkled with affection; to think I once would've seen human vision as proof that he was incapable of kindness. There had been a great number of leaps I'd needed to take internally, with everything I ever knew crumbling. Revelation after revelation challenged my certainties and beliefs until none survived.

I had come a long way from my first encounter with humanity, savoring an innocent man's suffering out of misguided vengeance for my daughter. How laughable was it that even after I'd been convinced of humanity's empathy, I'd believed they were struggling not to pounce on us at a moment's notice? While my therapist had refuted the existence of Terran bloodlust, I had nagging concerns about Gojid proclivities. After what Maronis told us, it was apparent that such constructs were inventions to keep us afraid of *regression*…all because of a poor understanding of odd diseases. When I talked to Vysith, even she knew what it was: as an Arxur from hundreds of years ago!

The truth is that I don't understand predators at all, but I know that they're not defined by their diet. I won't be defined by that either, anymore.

Aucel gazed at Carlos' casket, as Samantha retrieved a flower and placed it atop the cover. "They associate…beautiful plants with death?"

"I don't know why they do it, any more than why the Venlil decorate their plots with flowering bushes," I remarked. "I'd guess it's about making ugly things beautiful. Like why the City of the Flora is so gorgeous…to hide the shadow caste's ugliness underneath."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It depends on what you're hiding. One is a gesture of love for someone who's no longer around, perhaps symbolic of life's fragility. Another is beautifying the oppression of someone no longer around, symbolic of their *lies'* fragility. If he was here, Carlos

might've said it's our beliefs that make a thing good or evil."

"He must've meant a lot to you, to imagine what he would say now. But that only asks the big question about our morality, with the causes forced on us in the past. What do *we* believe now?"

"I believe all of us have suffered enough for one lifetime…that we don't have to let the wounds of the past hold us back. That the truth about ourselves may not be pretty, but that it can't be something we run from. And I believe it's worth trying to build something better."

Vysith lashed her tail. "Something better, hrr? Maybe one day, I'll find the strength to help my people…and you to help yours. But for now, let's go home."

"Yeah. We can figure out the future together, Dad. I'll be ready for anything, as long as I have your support," Hunter agreed.

I ruffled the human's brown hair, just how I used to with Hania. In that moment, I wasn't a broken man who'd been grieving his family for years, a captain who'd unraveled his own life's purpose, or a devastated conscript burying a guard-turned-friend. I was a father who wanted to see his children succeed, no matter what path their lives took. The galaxy's future under the United Nations could be prosperous, and I couldn't wait to settle down and watch the future unfold. My life's intersection with the predators had not only freed me from my past, but like the casket's flowers, it made my present reality a bit more beautiful.

Chapter 182

Memory transcription subject:*Onso, Yotul Technical Specialist*

Date [standardized human time]: April 9, 2137

Rather than settling down on Rinsa after arriving back at Leirn, I had duties to fulfill for my people before heading home. I was summoned to mainland Thysun, after requesting to speak to the Technocracy's Intelligence Panel in closed testimony; departmental leadership, implemented when we drove foreigners and Federation sympathizers away in the Great Reclaiming, was comprised of leading experts in various fields. The committee was a band of geopolitical specialists, threat assessors, and continuity-of-government planners. After seeing the quiet devastation of cyberwarfare, I'd entreated my government to create our own cyber division. The Yotul couldn't leave our infrastructure vulnerable to malicious programs.

While I doubt the humans will be our enemies in the near future, they still have the capabilities to unseat all our advancements without sending a single ship. We don't want anyone to have that level of power over us, like the Federation did.

It wasn't impossible that other planets would develop such capabilities either, especially without the Kolshian-led stagnation. Preparing for all eventualities was something that my people needed to prioritize, so we had protocol to fall back on for even the most unlikely of challenges. It was like building redundancies upon redundancies in engineering; if something went wrong, there should be more failsafes and backup plans than we'd ever need. That was Safety 101, and it shouldn't be any different with the security of our society. The Yotul Technocracy had made leaps and bounds since leaving the Federation. We were technological leaders, pushing the forefront of innovation alongside the humans.

Being one of the original three to aid Earth, after Kalsim's attack, meant that we were one of the most powerful nations in the Sapient Coalition…but it also meant we'd be a target for any ex-Federation members who resented the primates' victory. The Technocracy was mistrustful of the surrendering "neutrals", who were being weighed as trial additions to the SC; I wasn't thrilled about parties who hadn't stood up to the shadow caste, and their imperialism, having

a say in the alliance's internal affairs. I dropped a suggestion in my briefing, to enhance our digital espionage abilities, with that in mind. If anyone was plotting against us, militarily or diplomatically, we needed advance warning.

I'd left Thysun after several days of being questioned, on everything I knew about human and nonhuman military capabilities, and the exact details I'd written in my combat report. The Intelligence Panel promised to grant me a commendation for my seamless integration with our UN allies, before offering me my choice of a posting or a promotion—with their preference being a top-tier job in the Research and Development department. The idea of playing a part in our shipyards' mass construction program had appealed to me, almost as much as Sara Rosario's prior offer to restore Leirn. It would be prestigious, squarely in my field, and come with a pay increase; plus, I imagined I could request to stay in Rinsa, my own backyard.

Still, part of me wanted to leave the military behind. Tyler was waiting for me at the bullet train station, so I'd like to acquire his thoughts. I attended Carlos' funeral virtually on the locomotive ride across the Rinsa-Thysun Connector Bridge, and stared out at the glistening ocean waves in somber reflection on all that'd been lost. It once would've taken weeks by boat to travel intercontinental like this. The harbor where I'd spent days on the sailboat with Mama, salt spray on my lolling tongue and wind in my ears, was now replete with modernized haulers—though a few recreational ships, including an "Island Cruise Liner", were making a return. That turned my mourning to a bit of optimism, as we'd restored traces of what made us the Yotul.

"Well, hello Tyler," I murmured, spotting the tall human as the train pulled up to the station. His towering figure would stand out anywhere, even on Earth. "Why did you hang out here in Rinsa, while I was busy in Thysun, instead of heading home? It can't be just to teach me surfing."

I'd thought it was strange when Tyler took the shuttle down to Leirn's surface with me. After the entire mission revolved around rescuing Slanek, I expected him to assure the Venlil's return; instead, that fell to the handful of herbivore crew and Sovlin, who was lucky the Venlil didn't remember him. Officer Cardona's willingness to forsake the ship, with his promise to Marcel fulfilled,

suggested he might want to put the exchange program first. This could be not just about the offhand remark to teach me surfing, but also about strengthening our friendship. The move seemed semi-permanent even, since he hadn't returned to his homeworld at all. According to our chats, he had his belongings shipped to him, and was living at a UN foothold on Rinsa.

I love the idea of having some downtime with my friend, like we did in Brussels at our first meeting, but I can't turn down R&D for that. I already missed one prime opportunity for him. I need to help my family, and this pay hike could give my father retirement.

Tyler grinned as he spotted me, and walked slowly up to the train station. The primate was in civilian pelts, a casual shirt with tropical trees printed on it and beige shorts. I imagined that choice of attire had something to do with loving Rinsa's warm and temperate climate; there had been reports not just of Terran refugees, but also of requests for tourism flooding in after the war's conclusion. The village council was discussing permits for a beach resort by the harbor, injecting life into our economy. They were even considering using old Yotul technology, to give a "medieval" experience. It was strange for aliens to want to visit islanders that were considered "backward savages" even among our own kind, but I was touched that someone saw the beauty in our way of life.

"Buddy! The Michelin-star ramen chef is here to rescue you!" Tyler boomed, earning mystified looks from the other disembarking passengers. "I've been waitin' here, all by my lonesome, for you. I got some stuff to show ya."

I twitched my ears with amusement. "You know, the exchange program doesn't have any official oversight anymore. It's over. I don't have to go anywhere with you."

"Too bad; you're my hostage. With that smart brain of yours, I think I could get *quite* a ransom. After all, ya been chumming it up with the who's who of Thysun. Wait a second, do y'all got some spy agency that's following you, now that you're connected? I don't wanna be black bagged."

"I don't know. If you want to go through with holding me for ransom, you can find out."

"Nah. Don't feel like callin' your bluff today."

“You’re the one who bluffs. I’ve seen your mathematically dubious poker strategy.”

“That implies that I have a strategy! Now quit taking the piss, and walk with me. I got something for you back at the UN compound.”

“Fine,” I agreed, allowing him to drag me off down the sidewalk. “But you’re gonna tell me why you’ve moved out here, and sat around waiting for me.”

“Ain’t it obvious? First off, I’m here growing out my hair, though it’s gonna take way too long to get those surfer vibes. You were in Thysun for long enough I was startin’ to think I might have time to get some locks going. Now that you’re back, I brought you a board, and I’m gonna start teaching you how to ride the waves!”

I was silent for a long moment, mulling over how to respond. While I didn’t want to shoot down his enthusiasm, and the idea of learning Terran water sports sounded amazing, I wouldn’t have all this time during the day to devote to recreation. If I took the R&D job, I intended to work my ass off to advance the Yotul’s security. Sure, lazing around the beach under Ralchi’s warmth sounded divine, just as we had before setting sail to the Battle of Aafa. It was a blessing that we’d come back alive at all, with the enormity of casualties in the orbital battle. Carlos’ funeral, which we just listened in to, had been a poignant reminder of that fact. Staying in touch with Tyler and trying to balance work and life would be my goal, but I also had to think of my family.

My father isn’t getting any younger, and the time I have left with him grows shorter, the longer he works himself to death. The paycheck will be good, but not quite as life-changing as Sara’s program. I hope Tyler didn’t make any drastic moves to the detriment of his own career without consulting me.

While I’d told myself I’d confront my friend, my mind was all but set on taking the job. It would’ve been a relief in many ways to leave the military behind, but I needed to secure my future, my loved ones’ welfare, and my role in the Great Reclaiming. Very few people were offered two once-in-a-lifetime opportunities in short succession, so I’d be foolish to pass on an upgrade like this a second time. Years of studying engineering pointed to this path, so I wasn’t sure why I yearned for something more peaceable. When I’d watched the bombs fall on Caato, my conscience had shuddered to

think of building the tools to enable such devastation. Yet I knew the Technocracy wasn't the Duerten Shield; we wished to protect ourselves and level the playing field. It wasn't the same.

"Seriously, Onso, all I wanted since first contact was to be friends with aliens. Problem is, I'm louder and less cleaned-up than Marcel," Tyler remarked, prompting me out of my silence. "On Leirn, there's none of the fucking fragile prey act. I thought a change of scenery would be good for me, else I'm gonna punch Hunter next time he makes one of his shitty comments. Sovlin needs a place to come home to more than me; he's doin' good work."

My tail swished in acknowledgement. "That Gojid found his calling. I never thought I'd hear him praise the Yotul's culture, but the more I consider it, the more I think those 'primitive' comments were rooted in jealousy…that we still have our identity."

"Maybe. Point is, I got a transfer here, to literal fucking paradise on my favorite SC planet. Being near my best friend is a cherry on top. You can nerd out about all the Yotul culture you want, Onso; we don't got nowhere left to go."

"Not even to check on Slanek and Marcel?"

"The beauty of FTL comms. I don't like the idea of going to Skalga with 'Put A Visor On It' Veln as leader. Those two can come visit here, but I doubt that'll happen any time soon. Shit, that's right—I meant to give you the scoop on how they're doing! Marcel's been texting me, and he sent a video update a few hours ago, but I saved it to watch with you. One second!"

The human flashed his canine teeth, nearly throwing his holopad into my hands after pulling up the video. It was the same enthusiasm that had led him to call Marcel back in the lab; which, in fairness, had paid dividends despite its risks. It was obvious how much Tyler cared for the people close to him, with how he'd pledged to go to the galaxy's most spectacular battle to rescue a friend. Despite losing the Leirn restoration job, I was glad that I'd gone with my friend; it would've been much harder to coax the Venlil back to the ship without me. If love had lasted through the brain experimentation, it was possible the hatred for Sovlin would've lingered too, once the Salt Monster laid eyes on him. I peered at the recorded face of the red-haired Terran, who had a sheepish Slanek curled up next to him in the video.

Marcel smiled at the camera, with scars weathering his face. “I’m checking in with lots of good news, though it’s not all swimming. First off, Nulia has shown trouble at first getting attached to female figures—can’t blame her, after her mom abandoned her and…well, that’s not fair. I should have shouldered more of the responsibility, but too many things were hitting me at once. Anyhow, she’s finally starting to warm to Jensi. She really wants to join the mahjong games with Jensi’s human friends, but she’s a bit too young and those are…on hold, because Slanek finds that to be *way* too much.”

“Not…don’t want in my house,” the Venlil croaked. “Supposed to be…safe.”

“I know, buddy. I’ll protect you, right? What the Kolshians told you about us isn’t true. You lived on Earth and with our soldiers for months, and no humans hurt you.”

“I don’t remember. You said I trained with that…Tyler. It…he rescued me. When are we going to call him?”

Marcel’s expression fell. “We’re calling him right now, buddy. Focus up…look at the holopad camera. You see, it’s on? We’ve been filming for about thirty seconds. Tyler did go through the instinct suppression program with you, and we visited Skalga—”

“Where…what is Skalga?”

“It’s Venlil Prime’s name now; they voted it in officially a few weeks ago. It was the name before the Federation…World of Death. You remember what I told you about them screwing over the Venlil? Don’t cry, it’s alright. I’ll just keep reminding you of things.”

“It’s hard…keep things. Brain…catches nothing. I’m tired.”

“You can nap right here, until the nice Zurulian doctor comes to try to help you. If the Kolshians did this to you, then maybe it can be undone, right? I just wanted you to remember how our first visit to your planet together was with Tyler, while a cute little Tilfish kid named Virnt rode on his shoulders. That was after he saved us on Sillis, flying into headlong danger; he’s a bro. Why don’t you be a brave Venlil and wave at the camera?”

Slanek took a moment to locate the camera, before giving a disjointed swish of his tail. “There. Sleep now.”

Marcel gently pulled the Venlil’s already-dozing head onto his stomach. “Shit. You see what’s wrong? I was going to start with the

good news, like how my gene reversal went off without a hitch. No more allergic reactions from the slightest whiff of animal stuff. I can move back to Earth whenever, but I'm staying because Slanek needs me."

"Yes. Stay," the Venlil murmured. "Love Marcel."

"You know I love you, buddy. I'm right beside you. I won't sugarcoat it, Tyler; our pal here is pretty fucked up. They did a number on him. His short-term recall is hit or miss, since he can hardly focus, so I wind up explaining things several times. Any human that's not me, sometimes even just sighted out the window, makes him shut down. That's why I'm recording this, and not calling you live. This is the best I can do to get him to talk to you."

I pinned my ears against my head. "By Ralchi. This is terrible, seeing Slanek like this."

"I remember when he struggled with anxiety around us, but this is heartbreaking," Tyler whispered.

Marcel forced his smile to return. "We're making small progress, and Slanek's home. The best doctors at the Galactic Institute of Medicine are on it, and between Jensi and I, we can keep him on track. I hope you and Onso are doing well. You both risked your lives for us, so thank you for everything. It's a long journey ahead, but hopefully I'll be in touch with a more optimistic outlook soon."

The video flickered out, and I padded a few more steps after Tyler in somber silence. It would be difficult for Slanek to escape the lab's effects, though at least he wasn't separated from his friend; I hoped that, with medical aid, he'd be able to regain his faculties. It was only as I passed the holopad back that I noticed we were nowhere near the UN compound, where Officer Cardona claimed to have a gift for me. I thought the primate spoiled the surprise by announcing that he'd transported a surfboard here, but this…looked like the research complex for the Leirn restoration project. Sara Rosario was waiting by the gates, a lab coat over her shoulders.

Did Sara reach out to Tyler somehow? She was definitely expecting us, and we didn't wander here by mistake. I don't want to get my hopes up, though; I turned down the job, and didn't expect her to hold it.

Tyler clapped me on the back, his jovial mood returning as he saw my surprise. "Surprise! My transfer was really as security for this

complex here. You thought I wouldn't find out that you turned down this project for me, and didn't tell me so that I wouldn't feel guilty? I sensed something was off, so I did some digging."

"When I found out from Tyler why you passed up the job, Onso, I was even more impressed with you. Your loyalty is admirable," Sara chimed in. "I was happy to hold the position for as long as it took. I also took the liberty of getting the go-ahead from your government. The posting is yours, at the same price tag as the original offer, if you want it."

"You can't be serious? You both did that…for me?" I blinked several times, recalling how enthusiastic I'd felt on my tour of the facility; the hensas had been such a welcome sight from our past. R&D was a wonderful, technical gig, but this was the job that spoke to me. "Yes! Ralchi, I could leap into orbit with joy! I want nothing more than to restore Leirn to its former glory—even if it means I have to work with this bozo."

"That's not very nice, *Living Geyser of Fun Facts*," Tyler objected. "I spent weeks planning how to give you the perfect return home, and this is my reward?"

"What do you humans say? Cope and seethe?"

Tyler scowled at me, before I tackled him in a hug. He pried my arms off of him, holding a finger to implore me to wait. His blue eyes winked at me, suggesting he had something else in store for fulfilling my dreams. I tilted my head to the side, watching as he hurried over to Earth animal cages outside the facility; I recalled the Terrans had been importing pets as a stopgap for Yotul citizens. The primate clasped a lead in his hands, coaxing a massive, mottled-gray canine from the enclosure toward me. I recognized the dog as his pet, Zeus the Great Dane.

Officer Cardona hadn't left Zeus behind on Earth? I supposed it would be possible to get permission for canine companions, but why bring him here ahead of my arrival? His beloved pet should be at his place of residence, in comfortable surroundings. The human's smile widened, as he fitted the leash's loop around my wrist. Zeus turned around to sniff at me with a wet nose, before wagging his tail with affection; the domesticated animal must recognize my scent from his owner's pelts.

"Tyler and I both talked about how you wanted a big dog, after the

war," Sara commented.

The blond human bobbed his head. "I knew what I had to do. He's yours."

My eyes widened, staring at the gigantic canine. "What? No…I can't take Zeus, Tyler. He's *your* pet; you love him!"

"Yeah, but I can't have him on the base. I know you'll take good care of him, so I wanted you to have him. Don't worry, I'll tell ya everything you need to know about owning a pupper. Helps me too, 'cause I'll get to see him on a regular basis. It's a win for everyone involved."

"I…I don't know what to say."

"Say that Tyler is the best human to ever grace this universe."

"Fuck no. But I'll say you're a great friend…I'm glad I've gotten to know you. And if you're sure you're okay with it, I would be honored to have Zeus. He's going to be the most spoiled dog in the galaxy."

"Damn straight! Especially when I come over and bring him treats and dog bones. Definitely couldn't talk about how *predator* Zeus loves chomping down on bones to any other herbivore!"

"Long as it's not my bones, I don't care. Hensas hunted live prey back on the farm."

"Unless you got squirrel equivalents out here, Zeus won't chase nothin'. He's a good boy."

"He sure is. But I'm not sure I can take him right now; I'm sure I'm behind on lots of work in the project. I'm eager to get started, Doctor Rosario."

Sara chuckled to herself, stress lines fading from her face. "Well, you start the job today, Onso. How about, for your first assignment, you take your dog home, and go to the beach with this guy for some surfing lessons? One day to enjoy time with your friend won't hurt anything. After all we've been through, I'll call it worth it just to see a video of this."

"Well, that's very kind of you, but it can—"

Tyler scowled at me. "Don't you dare persuade her to assign you something, you deranged Yotul! I've been waiting *weeks* for you to get your ass back from Thysun. I *did* bring a surfboard, and we're

going, right now. C'mon."

With my friend's stern expression leaving no room for argument, I acquiesced to his beach demands. The idea of building an entire society, rather than just spaceships, helped me feel that Leirn was in control of our destiny once more. I hadn't dreamed that everything would fall back into place so perfectly, but I had Tyler to thank for that; he'd appreciated the sacrifice he was never supposed to know I made. There'd be no more missions to drag us away from home, and our packmates' fates were out of our paws. It was time to make a life here, one that involved a big dog today and hensas in the future.

I was grateful that I could live in a galactic community where I'd be seen as an equal, and that I could work alongside my friend to fulfill the magnificent dreams I had for the Yotul people.

Chapter 183

Memory transcription subject:*Ambassador Tarva Williams of the Venlil Republic*

Date [standardized human time]: October 9, 2137

Under an immense amount of pain, it was difficult to remember why I wanted to have a child in the first place.

I clung to Noah's hand as the contractions radiated pain through my body, finding it difficult to think. I forced myself to ruminate about how beautiful our family would be, and how much I loved my caring husband. Then again, no matter how supportive he wanted to be, he wasn't the one in excruciating agony; this required little effort on his part, didn't it? That wasn't a rational thought, but it was near impossible to be rational. Of course I wanted the astronaut here, to welcome his child. Just a little while ago, I'd been elated to see his reaction.

The doctors prompted me to push harder, and I strained against my own pain tolerance; if I'd welcomed two predators to Skalga in the flesh, before I knew they wouldn't eat me, and wagered my entire civilization on a possibility, what was a little labor pain? I was a strong, fierce woman, and I'd be damned if I waited a moment longer to hold my child. Noah had barely left my side since the pregnancy began, but now, it was like his hand was glued in mine. My human watched with nervous eyes, terrified of anything going wrong. He pressed the other palm against my back, though it wasn't comforting enough to make up for the fact that my insides wanted to be on my outside.

"We're almost there. You're doing great, sweetheart," Noah whispered, inches from my ear. "You're going to make the perfect mother. I believe in you, and I'm here for you and our child."

There was a brief flicker of happiness, knowing that, despite his insecurities, my Noah would make a wonderful father. I remembered seeing his binocular eyes staring straight at me, as we exchanged vows—the astronaut liked the Venlil ones enough to choose them. Our wedding had been a quiet ceremony, closed to the public despite the fact that our relationship had controversially (on both worlds) been announced. We'd started out from Skalga on

a sprawling spaceship we rented, with friends and family we invited. The ceremony had taken place halfway on the journey to Earth, before we landed in my husband's hometown for the reception.

To imagine how it once would've terrified all of my maternal instincts, a predator being right next to my newborn child. Noah implicitly had my trust; my brain didn't register him as a threat anymore, not even in the subconscious bits. My abdomen screamed in unfathomable pain, warring for my attention, but I fought onward for our beautiful daughter. We'd discussed names, Venlil and human, and settled on tribute to a friend of ours who spent his last breaths seeking peace. *Elia,* her name would be, harkening back to the dear Elias Meier. It felt right for the people we'd lost to be a part of this new life…for their memories to be carried on.

Elia is going to be beautiful, and I hope she takes after Meier's diplomatic spirit. I wish he'd gotten to see this victory, and to know that humanity would survive as a prosperous power.

Another wave of agony came with the newest spasm, as the process seemed never-ending. Stars, I loved my first daughter, but how had I forgotten how miserable this was? I had no more energy left, and even with desperate attempts to redirect my thoughts to Noah and his species, my motivation was waning. Why wasn't there a pause button on this ordeal? I tried to cling to something positive, though my brain begged for a reprieve. There were two cribs waiting in the nursery, where the planets of Skalga's system were painted on the ceiling. My human and I had a *home* together; it wasn't quite the opulent governor's mansion, but it was ours. What else…what else? Maternity leave from my ambassadorship would give me time to spend with my children.

That was it. *Children,* plural. Despite all my research on how to rear a human infant, I was woefully unprepared for raising a predator. How strange it was that such a powerful, fearsome species would be so fragile, and dependent on me. After a lengthy discussion, we'd decided to adopt a Terran boy that was six months old, since Venlil children matured quicker than the primates. Two newborns would've been a massive undertaking, with the sleepless nights and round-the-clock care. While it wouldn't quite bridge the age gap, we wanted to bring the hominid home early enough that he'd bond with us from his earliest memories. Noah and I wanted to hear his

first words, and when he took his first steps.

The two of us were slated to visit the UN embassy, where the paperwork had been prearranged; our little boy would be waiting for us in the Peacekeepers' care. Elia's big brother was sitting there in limbo, and we couldn't meet him until I finished up here. I didn't want to wait a second longer before making it official that he was my son. I didn't want to wait any longer to have a Venlil daughter again either; Elia's life was set to start *today!* A strength bubbled within me that I didn't even know I had, as I warred against my body to bring a pup into the world. The pain reached its crescendo, blinding me for several moments. The doctors latched onto a small, silver object, while I fell back to the pillow with exhaustion.

"My gosh! That's Elia; I saw her little head! Are you feeling alright, Tarva?" Noah asked.

I perked my ears, as the sound of braying, feeble cries reached me. "Elia's healthy, it sounds like. I don't know how I made it, but you have *no* idea how much that hurt."

"I hated seeing you in pain, my love. I wish there was something I could do to help, but I'm here *every* step of the way. You can rest now."

"No, I can't; Elia needs me. Let me see her. She needs someone to comfort her."

The doctors passed me the wet bundle of fur, which was wriggling within the blanket. In an instant, the pain and exhaustion was forgotten. It was all worth it—worth enduring a thousand times over—in a second. A dangerous protectiveness roared within me, as my precious daughter was passed into my arms. I held Elia close, trying to soothe her cries; her fragile body was so impossibly loud for something so small. Those little eyes peered up to me, not yet knowing me as her mother. Her snout was a bright pink, with two tiny slits that represented *nostrils*. Her legs were fragile, yet the important thing was that they were not crooked.

She would be a force of nature, with all of the senses and abilities that Venlil were meant to have. While the deformed people of my generation had been known as the weakest species in the galaxy, Elia would not share that repute. Without gene mod gentling and *prey instincts,* she'd have the fighting spirit my ancestors resisted the Federation with. It was true that we were the most emotional

species, but that wasn't weakness. My husband belonged to the race I believed was number two in the rankings for the strength of their feelings, and they'd toppled a millenia-old empire with their tireless spirit. The Farsul archivists had feared *us* in our anger more than humanity.

Once enough Venlil accept the gene reversal—more than the millions who already have—there's no reason we can't go back to being a species that will never be broken or surrender. Children like Elia can accomplish anything; her future is bright, and not subject to any artificial biological limits.

I couldn't wait to see how she inherited the best traits of both of our worlds; our main residence was on Skalga, so that we could play a direct role in restoring the Venlil to our true selves. If the political situation for humans became more dire than Veln's pandering, I wasn't opposed to switching to Earth. I'd upend any part of my life, or place myself in harm's way any number of times, if it meant keeping my children safe. Noah smiled behind his holopad, snapping a photograph of me holding the baby. He reached out with his sturdy arms, as if prompting me to pass what was now the center of my entire world.

I loved my husband dearly, but that affection was a mere seed in the ground compared to the ocean of adoration I felt for Elia. All I could see in my head was the tragedy that occurred the last time I let a daughter venture out of my sight; what if something terrible happened, because I wasn't around to protect her? I thought I trusted Noah to keep her safe, but the reality of letting her go left me torn up inside. I wanted to keep her in my grasp forever, never to let go. The predator tilted his head, eyebrows arching up.

"Let me see the kiddo, Tarva. I know I've never held a baby, but I'll be gentle. Don't worry, I won't drop her. She's just the cutest thing; oh, my heart is melting!" Noah said. "I'm a father, and it's like nothing else in the whole wide world matters."

Tears swelled in my eyes, as I forced my heavy arms to pass the baby toward Noah. As the human's finger pressed through her fluffy, soft-as-a-cloud fur, I couldn't release my grip. What if there was something I hadn't accounted for, such as Terran mate's responding to a newborn in a way that would endanger a Venlil? It was irrational paranoia, but it wouldn't leave my mind. I took a

deep breath, noticing the growing concern in his binocular gaze.

This was the man who was my soulmate, who treasured me and who'd fallen over himself to accommodate my sudden dream of having Elia. I *wanted* to share it with him, no matter how difficult it was to expose her to any risks—regardless of how small they were. I steeled myself, and forced my paws to do something much more challenging than labor. I relinquished my grip on my daughter, and Noah took her out of my control. The Terran started grinning like an idiot, overjoyed to have her nestled against his elbow; she wasn't even the length of his forearm. The crying stopped the second the predator held her, and tickled her tiny nose with his fingertip.

"Oh my, Tarva. I want us to be everything Elia needs. How do we do that?" Noah whispered.

"Together." My body finally relaxed, seeing my daughter safe in my beloved's arms. She looked like she belonged there, tucked against his chest. "You're a natural father. I'm sorry about earlier…it was just hard to let go."

"It'll get easier: one day at a time. I was worried you were scared of me, for a moment."

"Can you blame me? Everyone knows humans eat Venlil pups for breakfast."

"Right next to the bacon and the orange juice. You make a good point."

"I always do. It's one of my *many* endearing qualities."

"You can say that again. You know, since sweet little Elia is related to you…I think she's gonna kick her brother's ass. We have to watch out for her. I've heard true Skalgans are terrors."

"I'm hoping she'll take after her more mellow namesake. And on the topic of names…if we're going to bring home our other child today, we still need a name. We haven't settled on one; I don't know who else to pay homage to. I thought about Sara, or some variant of her last name…but Rosa is more feminine in your tongue."

"We were both the first pioneers to set sail from Earth on an FTL flight. She's a great scientific mind who's done a great service to both truth and human discovery, from Skalga's survey, to the empathy tests, to Leirn. I like the idea of taking a bite-sized snippet from Rosario. How about Ari? It's a bit more subtle."

“Ari. That does have a nice ring to it. We’ll have to tell Sara who inspired it someday.”

“Hopefully, she’ll come visit us from time to time so that we can. We’re not that forgettable!”

When Sara attended our wedding, it wasn’t evident how often she intended to return to Skalga going forward; she’d piled tons of work onto her plate with the Yotul. I hoped she’d be involved as an honorary aunt, but I imagined her ambitions to repair the galaxy wouldn’t leave her much time. It was fitting to give a nod to her, as one of my original Terran friends. Elia and Ari would be reminders of two figures who were instrumental in making our family possible, free of Federation control or Arxur threats. It wouldn’t be easy to raise a human and a Venlil side-by-side, but I was confident we could handle the challenges. I could imagine the children tussling in the grass, playing together and running around on strong legs.

I’m not sure Elia can keep up with a persistence predator, but she won’t tucker out easily. Maybe Noah will be proven right about her being a handful.

With both of us regarded as important historical figures, our children would have a lot to learn. We’d be under the spotlight, especially since I hadn’t stepped down as Venlil ambassador, despite my interspecies marriage. Noah and I would teach our offspring not to be ashamed of our family, or their own differences. We’d teach them to do what was right, regardless of the risks. A new era was dawning on Skalga, and this second chance at motherhood played right into the big picture. The Sapient Coalition could give us a forum to develop our own might, with the next generation bringing us back to our roots.

The Venlil spirit might’ve been suppressed for centuries, but it wasn’t snuffed out. The more I thought about it, the more confident I was that Elia wouldn’t need my protection; it would be all of us needing protection from her, should she embrace her wild side. It was probably a good thing her brother and father would be from a predator race. Which customs and mannerisms would jump the gap, in our multiplanetary household? How would the Terrans’ kind-hearted nature manifest in my son? It was a relief that humanity wasn’t under threat of extinction anymore; I wouldn’t have to worry

about Ari belonging to an endangered species.

“All of this started when I met you,” I told Noah. “To think I almost let the Federation take away the one person who understands me implicitly. Who will make our family—who made my heart—whole.”

The human handed Elia back to me, the loopy smile still on his face. “I helped, Tarva, but you did all of that yourself. I just proved whatever was written about us in that dossier wrong.”

“You sure did. You want to know what I was thinking, when I saw your ship coming?”

“‘Wow, that ship is smoking hot! The pilot must be a stud?’”

“No, you big goof. I thought there were two known instances of a predatory species achieving sapience. I listed it all out in my head.”

“And now, you know it was all the omnivores too?”

“Actually, I know now that I was right about there being two. I was just wrong about who. The Kolshians and the Farsul were the two, bringing about cruelties and atrocities to maintain control. The ones who would’ve kept us apart. I can’t wait for whatever our family’s future holds.”

“Me too. All I wanted was friendship and peace in the stars, but you gave me so much more. Looking at Elia…I didn’t know it was possible to feel such deep emotions. I’ll be by your side forever, Tarva.”

Staring into Noah’s loving eyes, I was certain that *this* was humanity’s true nature. They were a species that would be loyal to the ends of the universe, and would endure anything to protect the people they cared about. Their mere introduction had brought out the best in dozens of races, and altered the course of galactic history. For all my internal fears, I knew Elia and Ari would be lucky to have a predator, the love of my life, watching over them. I couldn’t imagine having a life and a family that was any more perfect than this one.

Chapter 184 - Finale

Memory Transcription Subject:*CaptainKalsim, United Nations Prisoner*

Date [standardized human time]: January 1, 2150

Humanity was a species that I had equated to a virus: something infectious that would take over everything they touched.

As I watched the galaxy transform through news reports and a closed internet link in my cell, I saw that I was right on that front. Their culture became a dominant powerhouse, with entertainment franchises that ballooned in ways unimaginable for predator ideas. Terran bands toured across entire planets, playing at festivals to diverse audiences—sometimes, those gatherings were devoted to restoring the pasts shown in the Archives. Films and games with gratuitous input, from binocular-eyed characters to predator-diseased violence, sold like wildfire. Terran traditions and mannerisms became known across the galaxy.

Earth became the heart of the Sapient Coalition, as they began to move past the bombing. I'd regretted that I had no choice but to cut their cities down, even before my mission was a failure. One by one, the Terrans rebuilt every last one of the major epicenters from the ashes; their technological advances came at a staggering rate. Vienna, which currently hosted over one hundred alien embassies, had also become a hub of scientific research—ever since it had been deemed the host city of Project Chronicle. That was a project to restore the teachings of every species' depraved past, so they could go back to their barbaric, primitive ways.

Tens of thousands of aliens arrived on Earth's soil to participate in the restoration efforts. Genetic advancements piled up from the sister project, as the United Nations gradually convinced more former omnivores to remove their meat allergies. That included the Krakotl, restoring their bloodlust, after Terrans replaced our honorable government with some wishy-washy plant, Nuela. I was appalled to see how far my species had fallen. It wasn't long before former-Federation oddities appeared on news programs about dabbling in these culinary sins. Part of why these races were so curious to try the full-fledged human meals was that their vegetable dishes had spread along with their culture, and wowed with their

complexity. To think, those fools patronized a predator's banquet!

The cure that I begged the Terrans to take; they truly did pity us for having our bloodlust removed. In a little over a decade, they've undone millennia of progress!

It had been hopeless the moment the Kolshians fell to their onslaught. The humans launched attack after attack on the very foundation of the Federation's beliefs. Exterminators, the very profession I'd once been a part of, either shuttered their doors, or became something unrecognizable that went by other names. Terrans convinced the public that predator attacks were sapient assaults, and once that idea was planted, it became true. They'd also activated pity for the burning beasts, like I'd felt the first time I doused younglings in gasoline. It was a horrific process, sure, but necessary to remove their traces.

"How contaminated must all these worlds be now?" I mused aloud, staring at the dingy walls of my tiny cell. "Humans have spread to almost every planet. They start more colonies before even filling up the old ones, just for some domineering drive."

My voice was fraught with both age and disuse; sometimes, I talked aloud to keep myself sane. When the humans gave me the internet link, it came with a caveat. They kept sending me profiles on Terrans who died during my raid, forcing me to look at the details of their lives. I couldn't access the rest of the web until I watched the morning's videos. Hadn't I been burdened with enough guilt, knowing they were feeling and compassionate creatures? I didn't know why I craved connection to this awful reality enough to go through such torment. For some reason, I always watched their October 17 ceremony—a planetary holiday not just across Earth, but many SC powers as well. Remembrance Day, they called it.

I remembered all of the impossible choices I'd had to make, protecting other lifeforms over Terrans. I remembered standing on that bridge, desperately trying to fire off our bombs as the Arxur arrived…and I remembered it too well, even in my old age. Part of me had hoped either natural conditions would free me from this world through death's release, or that they'd wipe my memory clean of the awful things I'd seen. In the end, I knew I'd damned Nishtal and killed millions on Earth in a sacrifice that amounted to nothing. The kernels of doubt were the worst part of it.

Still, I remembered what was wrong with these Earthlings as I watched every aspect of the Federation crumble; predator disease facilities were a target of their assault. Despite their prior assertions that predator attacks were done by wicked minds, the humans thought that was something that could be talked away—and that the herd shouldn't be protected at all! I recalled how dangerous Jala had been, even with someone like me to control her. Those violent desires, coupled with a lack of empathy, could result in attacks if extraneous behaviors weren't stopped. Terran psychology babble was one of their most outrageous takeovers.

Nothing was sacrosanct. The humans fought to preserve wild predators that'd eat anything that crossed their jaws, due to their warped view of ecology. It was a far cry from the doctrine of little predators becoming big predators, and reproducing exponentially. Species like the Yotul didn't have the refinement to resist uncivilized nonsense; those marsupials were among the first to welcome Terran attacks on all of these fronts. Governor Veln, who I'd had such high hopes for, became a non-committal flip-flopper who seemed to be altering Venlil society…in crawling increments. He lost re-election by a landslide, and someone from Tarva's corner was right back in power.

I've seen all of our sacred beliefs attacked by humans, and how much damage they've done to the chance the Kolshians gave us to be civilized. I've watched them spread throughout the stars, just like I feared—and I've seen they're never satisfied. They still plan to push further.

Years of my life were spent in a waiting game, for the eventuality that I'd promised to Arjun, back when we held him hostage. Humanity's growth would lead to them building an empire off of the backs of prey species, as predicted by their history. Without being gentled and saved from their innate sin, their bloodlust would lead them to temptations…and the atrocities would begin. I assumed it would happen with the Federation powers that didn't surrender. When the United Nations' mighty military sent out manpower to overthrow governments, starting with the Yulpa homeworld of Grenelka, I assumed it was the beginning. My prophecies would be vindicated.

These races, including their so-called friends, were weaker than them, playthings at best. With their foot soldiers back out on the prowl, they'd get a taste for killing and enslaving other cultures

once more. They didn't have to play at docility for their survival, so what was to stop them from giving in to their true nature? What was to prevent them from taking what belonged to others for themselves, with their military now stronger than the fledgling force that *still* defeated the thousand-year-old Kolshian empire?

There was no reason for them to restrain themselves, or to be *able* to restrain themselves…and yet they did. Grenelka, and dozens of worlds that followed it, had their leaders cut down with precision… and then, they were rebuilt from the ground up. The humans took the time to create something new from their strike, setting up new agencies that were staffed by locals and wouldn't answer to the UN. With hostile powers under their crosshairs, the Terrans showed mercy. They wanted others to stand on their own as *equals*, a concept that violated the core of what being a predator meant.

"Humanity has spread everywhere, and taken our systems, just as I knew they would. Exponential growth," I chirped aloud. "Yet more herbivore worlds haven't fallen. What happened to their inner violence? Their phenomenal cruelty?"

If my mission hadn't been for the Federation's survival, then I hadn't needed to spearhead the extermination fleet at all. All I saw in humanity's ventures, whether through implied or outward motivations, was endless compassion. For the weak and vulnerable. For the herd anomalies. For those who'd sought forgiveness after grave insults. For those that didn't deserve their compassion: just as that Terran judge had spared me, despite what I'd inflicted on his kind. I couldn't understand how it was possible, and yet their astounding empathy was all that I found.

Predator volunteers rushed off to every world, working impossible hours daily for little compensation, as cattle rescues overwhelmed local systems. Human scientists used their new genetic capabilities to scrutinize diseases, even ones that didn't affect their species at all. The United Nations were the cooler heads among the SC, staving off vengeful deeds—Earth was the sole party that actually processed asylum requests from caged Talsk, and spent inordinate amounts on ships capable of shrugging off the "Kessler Syndrome." War tribunals held in Vienna issued blanket pardons for all "child soldiers," much to the outrage of their allies. Human civilians' ventures were delighted to strike up partnerships, parallel to the government's close work with Leirn, Skalga, Colia, Khoa, and

countless others.

Had humanity truly deserved to be purged from existence like a disease? Was this all just hatred over their appearance and their diet, like the pilot begging for his family's life had told me? After all this time, their hunger and bloodlust should have surfaced—with unequivocal proof of what they were! They had every opportunity to at least sate their hunger for power; they founded the largest faction in the galaxy. Hundreds of millions of aliens lived on Earth, and the cultural blending meant they would have to hide their instincts at all times. Someone was always watching.

Yet they never falter. What if they aren't masking their instincts…at all?

It had been a simple truth that predators killed by nature, but now, I wasn't so sure. When Cilany interviewed me, before my trial, I'd stood by my comparison of humanity to a virus. Their rejection of the cure was what led me to believe that their good side wasn't strong enough to salvage. I'd waited for them to conquer the rest of the galaxy, yet with the passing of time, I'd begun to understand that they already had. Not with guns, bombs, or starship armadas. Not with occupations or pillaging. The Terrans conquered the galaxy through compassion—a desire for friendship and healing that existed without any modifications to their predator coding.

Perhaps they'd done horrific things to each other many years ago, but I could see that humans had become something else altogether. Their true selves, at the pinnacle of their advancement and the height of their power, were galactic caretakers: capable of emotion on par with the Venlil. For every Federation tenet they perverted, I couldn't help but notice they'd ushered in a level of peace incompatible with any goals of violence. Life was better under their rule than the Kolshians or the Farsul. It was an unacceptable truth, to realize Earth would never be a spacefaring planet of domineering brutes.

The enormity of the guilt crushed my very soul and conviction; the tragedy was how truly *unnecessary* my genocide had been. Everything that we'd believed about humanity's intentions was patently false, despite all wisdom and prior experience. Their emotional depth drove them, with a legitimacy that shouldn't have been possible. There could be no greater punishment than to watch the galaxy move on without me, and to be forced into slowly

realizing how erroneous my understanding was of the fundamental nature of predators.